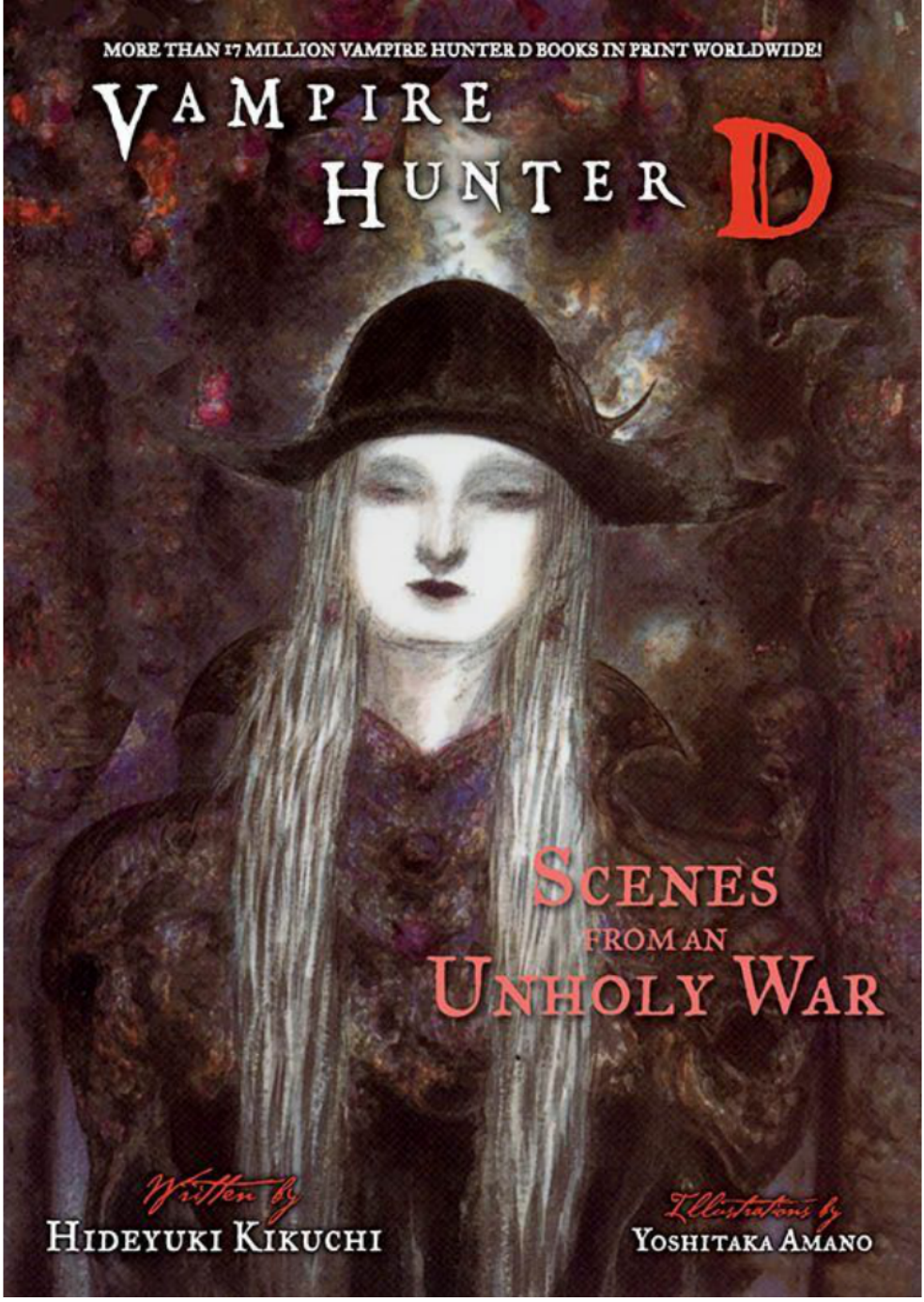
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VAMPIRE HUNTER D
SCENES FROM AN UNHOLY WAR
Written by
HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI
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Scenes from an Unholy War

Vampire Hunter D [20]

Hideyuki Kikuchi

Dark Horse Comics (2014)

VAMPIRE HUNTER D

VOLUME 20

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Scenes from an Unholy War

LYRA AND RUST

CHAPTER 1

I

D had seen the pair twice.

The first time was in winter.

It was on the road in the northern Frontier. Snow was flying. Though travelers who were in a hurry gave it the evil eye, the snow hadn't let up for ten days. Lodging houses were crammed with stranded people, and villages designated by the Capital as overseers for the sector sent out snowplows and service beasts, barely managing to keep the roads clear enough for cyborg horse traffic.

But the snow that kept the people trapped inside brought them some enjoyment. Lights burned in the windows of the lodging houses, and there was singing. Perhaps they were joined by traveling minstrels, for a guitar accompanied the chorus of voices, male and female, that spilled from the inn while three young people rode past. Two riders from the south, headed north; one rider from the north, headed south.

The pair consisted of a woman in a crimson cape like a flame in that world of white, and a young man wearing an insulated coat of ash gray. The lone rider wore a traveler's hat and a jet-black coat that made him look like wintry death, and he too was young. But he was so handsome! If all the snow that'd fallen since the very birth of this world were compacted into a single human form, the way diamonds were created from coal, it might've made something as lovely as this young man's features. It was D.

Even harried travelers couldn't help but wheel their mounts in the direction of the warm glow of the windows, but these three didn't even glance at them, as if they were something to be shunned. Nor did any of them look at the other riders. As if led by the snow itself, the three riders were swallowed up by the world of white. All that remained on the wintry highway was the stillness of the snow, the glow from the windows, and the voices raised in song. Where the trio that turned their backs on such things went, no one could say.

The second time was in fall.

It was in a saloon in the eastern Frontier. D was scheduled to meet a client there. By day, the bar doubled as a restaurant. Aside from D, there were no patrons. A steaming cup of coffee sat before the Hunter. This cup rested there without ever being touched. Waitresses who doubled as dancing girls at night slumped against the bar, most looking as if they were wasting away from some disease. That was the effect of D's beauty.

Outside, yellowed and fallen leaves rustled faintly in a light wind. A man and a woman entered the saloon. A single crisp leaf had landed on the shoulder of her crimson cape. At the bar, the pair ordered whiskey.

They made no effort to look over at D, just as they hadn't a year earlier. When the pair reached for the glasses the bartender had produced, the floor creaked under the boots of three more men.

"We found you, freak!" the mustachioed man in the center of the trio shouted. "Time to die!"

His right hand had already drawn the bolt gun from his hip and aimed it at the pair.

An ash-gray wind whipped up a crimson flame.

The head of the mustachioed man was split in half, and the other two had arrows of black iron buried in their shoulders.

The woman returned her longsword to the recesses of her cape, and the young man put away his iron short bow. It was unclear exactly when they'd had time to produce those weapons and put them to use. In fact, the woman was so far from the man that her longsword couldn't possibly have split his head.

Giving a frosty glance to the groaning pair and to the mustachioed figure that lay utterly motionless on the floor, the woman then looked at the young man. "How kind of you," she said sarcastically. "When the sheriff gets here, I'll thank you to tell him exactly what you saw," the woman told the bartender and waitresses behind the counter before urging the young man to leave the bar with her. The unbearable weariness of the expression he wore would be left hanging in the room for ages.

As D stood there, still and with no emotion at all on his face, the bartender fearfully inquired, "You know them?"

The third time was in summer.

It was in the village of Geneve, at the western edge of the western Frontier.

"Sorry, but the situation's changed," the gray-haired mayor said, setting a little bag down on the table as he made his apology. It was around noon, in the mayor's office. "It seems the Black Death gang won't be coming. Now, this isn't the whole amount, but there's two-thirds of the agreed fee there. You'll simply have to settle for that. All the other Hunters have accepted the same offer."

"Personally, I think a third would've been plenty," sulked the enormous meatball of a man who stood behind the mayor. A short while earlier, he'd introduced himself as Odama, the deputy mayor. There wasn't a single hair on his head. "I don't care if we said we'd hire them or not; these Hunters are all just a bunch of mongrels, anyway. What would they know about honoring an agreement? To the contrary, if we want to keep them from joining up with the Black Death, we should take them out before they have a chance to leave our fair—"

"Odama, shut your miserable mouth!" the mayor shouted.

The deputy mayor's thick lips twisted, but he held his tongue.

"Begging your pardon," said the girl who stood to Odama's right. The golden hair that flowed down to her waist swayed gently. With blue eyes brimming with light and a high, slim nose, she was the sort of beauty who ordinarily made men look twice, but that wouldn't be the case with their visitor today. Her eyes were damp and feverish, her tone heart rending as she apologized. "The deputy mayor's remarks are unconscionable. You have our apologies," continued Sheryl—the mayor's secretary. There was a striking resemblance around the mouth, and in fact, she was his daughter.

"I don't want your money," D said softly, his serene tone freezing the other three. "But I will take something else instead."

"Wha—" Odama began to groan, and then a stark flash of light streaked by his face.

Though there was the *ching!* of his sword's hilt meeting its scabbard on D's back, none of the others' eyes had captured what transpired. All that the mayor and Sheryl saw was the black back of the Hunter as he headed for the door. As D's left hand slipped casually down by his side, there was a sound like someone clearing his throat.

As if that were its cue, a cry of surprise and pain then caused the pair to turn.

Odama was clutching his nose with both hands. Bright blood spilled between plump, grublike fingers.

"My nose—he . . ."

The pair followed the panicked gaze of the fat man down to his feet. His unsightly, bulbous nose sat there. Droplets of blood drizzled down all over it.

"To do such a thing . . . here, of all places," Sheryl murmured dazedly, and then she turned her gaze to the door. Though there'd been no indication that anyone had opened it or closed it again, no one stood there any longer.

D went straight to the inn. Every villager he passed on the way there came slowly to a stop, looking as if they were melting away like butter. Since the village stood at the intersection of two major roadways, a rather large inn had been established to accommodate merchants. D got a room there. This was a rare occurrence. When a deal fell through, he always left town right away.

On entering the room, D stood in the center of the floor, raising his left hand and turning its palm in all directions. Once he'd finished sweeping it in a circle, the hoarse voice assured him, "No electronic, demonic, or otherwise paranormal traps here. Hurry up and lie down. If we don't set you right now, you'll have to bury yourself for a good long time."

As soon as the check of the room was done, D headed for the bed. Leaving his unpacked bag on the floor, he kept the saddlebags slung over his shoulder. The instant he reached the bed, his gait faltered.

Staggering, he fell flat on his back. The springs creaked.

Clearly something had happened to the body beneath that black raiment. His pale flesh had yellowed like an autumn leaf, and his breathing was labored. The gorgeous youth, normally a tower of stamina, couldn't bear this. Sweat began to soak the surface of his otherwise parched skin.

"Damn it!" his left hand groaned. "You left the curtains open. And the bed still needs to be moved. But you can't budge a finger. Call the front desk!"

There was no reply. D didn't appear to so much as move a muscle.

However, his left hand said, "All right!" Rising slowly, it took hold of the mouthpiece of the speaking tube installed by the headboard. "This is room 306. I need the coolest head you've got on your staff. Male or female, it makes no difference."

Returning the tube to the wall, it said, "To think of it, sunlight syndrome hitting you just as you left the town hall! At least you managed to nab some dirt."

Occurring solely in dhampirs due to their Noble blood, sunlight syndrome was an abruptly striking ailment. As long as the sufferer was exposed to sunlight their whole body would stiffen, leaving them paralyzed before they eventually lost consciousness. Their body temperature would drop below that of a corpse, and their breaths would come several minutes apart. In order to recover, they needed to be buried somewhere shady with only their head left exposed while they rested, although how long that would take varied greatly. In D's case, the average was about two days, although in one case it'd taken him two weeks to recuperate.

As the ailment came on suddenly and there were no warning signs, even the toughest dhampirs were powerless in the face of these attacks, and in many cases they fell victim to the Nobility they hunted thanks to this fearful malady. It was normal for all dhampirs to lose consciousness the instant the condition struck, but from what the Hunter's left hand had said, it'd struck D right after he left the town hall. He'd brought his horse the two hundred yards to the hotel, checked in without the bellhops even noticing, and made it up to his room without any assistance. But then, this was D.

II

Five minutes later, there was a knock.

"Come in," the left hand ordered.

"Begging your pardon," said the boy of twelve or thirteen who stepped into the room.

"What, a freaking kid?" the left hand muttered before telling the boy, "I'm feeling a little under the weather. Do just as I say."

The boy's eyes widened. Not only did the voice sound completely different from the one he'd heard down at the front desk, but he also couldn't shake the feeling it came from the palm of the man's left hand. Regardless, this was a guest, and the customer was always right.

"How may I assist you?" he inquired politely yet apprehensively.

"Pour what's in those saddlebags all over me."

"And what might they contain?"

"Dirt."

The boy looked surprised, but his expression was neither one of curiosity about the nature of this guest nor horror at the prospect of dirtying the room.

"Very well."

The boy bowed and then circled around to D's left side. Taking the saddlebags, he sprinkled the contents of the two compartments over D from the neck down. In less than five minutes, he was done. Atop the bed, D was covered with dirt all the way to his toes.

Admiring the boy's skill, the hoarse voice remarked, "You're an old hand at this, ain't you? Don't tell me you've had to do the same for other sufferers before."

"No, this is the first time," the boy replied, his chest puffing. "But I've had practice. The treatment for sunlight syndrome is part of our training here at the hotel."

"Part of your training? Treating sunlight syndrome? This is some hotel!"

The left hand's surprising voice had caused the boy to make a stranger and astounding revelation. Why, this hotel had services to fully deal with the essential biological needs of dhampirs! While there wasn't a single person on the Frontier unfamiliar with the nature of dhampirs or the kind of work they did, most went their entire lives without ever seeing one in the flesh. Probably no hotel would bother to consider a service for the needs of a special kind of guest that might visit perhaps once in a century.

"Is this a trap?" the left hand mused, thinking the worst.

However, just as the boy had said, he drew the curtains and moved the bed where the light from the window wouldn't reach it, with the deft movements of a well-trained professional.

"I'll be damned," the left hand groaned. The boy had performed both those actions without needing to be asked.

"If that's all, I'll be going now," the boy said, bowing again and heading for the door.

"Wait, I've got your tip!" the hoarse voice called to him.

"Accepting a gratuity would be against the rules," he said, declining the offer.

"What an odd little hotel you have here. Is that the case with every guest?"

"No. Only in the case of dhampirs."

"So, dhampirs get better service than normal humans? What are you trying to pull?"

"Not a thing. Now, if you'll excuse me."

Turning its palm to the door as it closed, the left hand murmured, "This place gives me the creeps. We'd better get out of here as fast as we can. Now, how about a quick and dirty remedy?"

As it said this, a tiny mouth opened in the palm of the hand. There was a low groan of rushing air, and then a pale blue spark could be seen deep in its gullet.

"We're all set with the pitcher of water. My breath should serve for the wind."

Earth, wind, water, and fire had all been assembled. These four elements could be called the source of D's life, and having gathered them all, his left hand now began a weird and magical treatment in their rustic hotel room.

As D perspired in the room, so hot even air conditioning couldn't cool him, there was another knock at the door.

"Back again?" the hoarse voice mused dubiously. Not five minutes had passed since the boy had left. "Who is it?"

A youthful voice responded, "Sheriff Rust. I heard there's a dhampir staying here. There's something I'd like to discuss."

"Turn him down," the hoarse voice said fervently.

But just then, a low voice said, "Let him in." Though it sounded pained, the voice had the same steely ring as always.

D's eyes were open. Though he was still perspiring, his skin had reclaimed some of its former tone.

"Are you sure? If someone were to make a move on you now, you'd be in a bad way. This might be one of the deputy mayor's flunkies."

His left hand made no mention of the nose the Hunter had lopped off.

"If that's the case, he's bound to come sooner or later. But just like this hotel, the sheriff might be a little different."

"Hmm, interesting. Okay, come in," the hoarse voice said through the door.

The young man's height rivaled D's. Though it was summer, he wore a coat. The gold badge affixed to the chest of his shirt was so polished it reflected D's face. Naturally, the combat belt around his waist had a pistol in its holster. He also sported a smart purple bandanna around his neck. With closely cropped blond hair, he had manly features graced by a grin.

The hoarse voice gasped.

"This makes three times, doesn't it?" D said in a low voice.

Sheriff Rust's grin deepened.

“I’d heard there was a Hunter in black here so handsome he could make even men faint. I had a hunch it might be you, and sure enough, it is.”

Having passed on a wintry highway, neither bothering to look at the lights in the windows, D and the sheriff remembered each other.

“Doesn’t really suit me, does it?” Rust laughed, pointing with some embarrassment to the badge on his chest.

“It is rather unexpected,” D said, his face devoid of emotion. It was unclear whether or not the sheriff realized the words were sincere.

Rust bared his teeth, saying, “No, I’m sure it wouldn’t matter much to you, would it? Damn, you’re so good looking; it’s just throwing me right off balance.” Noticing the Hunter’s condition, he continued, “Sorry. How are you feeling, anyway?”

Not replying, D asked instead, “Are you the one who taught the bellhop what to do?”

“That’s right.”

“It was a great help,” D managed to say.

“Glad to hear it. You go on and get some rest now.”

“Isn’t there anything else you’d like to discuss?” the Hunter asked, his query likely to freeze the blood of anyone who knew what’d transpired at the town hall.

Grinning wryly, Rust replied, “Seems you took off the deputy mayor’s nose. Just before you checked into the hotel, one of his toadies came and filed a complaint, but before I headed over here, the same guy came back to retract it. The mayor probably talked him out of it. That old man’s still got a backbone of iron. Odama would like to grab his position right away, I bet, but he’s got about thirty years to wait. At any rate, now no one has any problem with you. Just rest up now.”

“How long’s it been?” asked D.

Squinting a bit as he pondered the question, Rust replied, “Since I’ve been in this village? A half year, give or take. Haven’t really settled in yet, have I?”

“You can say that again,” the hoarse voice concurred.

Rust’s eyes fired off a quick look of suspicion, and then focused on D again.

The gorgeous patient asked, “Is the woman with you?” As he spoke, it was unclear whether D recalled the sight of the woman in the crimson cape executing a bizarre trick with her sword in a bar in autumn while the leaves were falling.

The youthful face reflected in D’s eyes grew distorted for a moment. The sheriff had nodded.

“I can’t part company with Lyra. We’ll be leaving town soon.” Once he’d finished saying that, a weight seemed to have lifted from him, with his amiable expression returning. “Nice meeting you. See you later.”

Turning his back to the Hunter, he got all the way to the door before

he turned again.

"I absolutely won't have any trouble in town. Save it till after I'm gone."

Snapping a two-fingered salute from the side of his face, Rust left.

As soon as the door had closed, the hoarse voice said teasingly, "He's like a whole new man. I knew from the start he wasn't cut out for the road. Look how settled he's gotten in just six months. He was built for a life with his feet firmly on the ground. He said he's hitting the road, but it looks to me like he wants to live here. In which case, I wonder if he can't find work if he stays."

"Why does he travel?" D mused. Was the Hunter curious about the young man?

"Damned if I know."

"Then there's the woman."

"Yes, indeed. Now there's one you won't find playing sheriff. The look in her eye, the way she moves, and that trick with her sword—that's a warrior, through and through. And they've been traveling together for years. Are they lovers who can't go home? Nope. I'm sure you've noticed, too. When she looks at Rust, it's with tension and a lust for blood."

Rust had said he couldn't part company with her. What sort of fate was this woman leading him to?

"Of course, if those bandits are headed this way, they're gonna need people to help. Are we gonna wait around for that gig?"

"Can we set out tomorrow?" D inquired.

"Most likely. But you won't be a hundred percent. Let's stay here till you're fully recovered. If they find out what condition you're in, every Hunter and warrior in the Frontier out to make a name for himself will come gunning for you."

"I'm fine with that."

"Hey, don't get me wrong. I'm not worried about what'll happen to you. I'm talking about the guys you'll take out. Wipe out all the Hunters and warriors on the Frontier, and there's always the danger that the remaining Nobility might regain power. Based on past experience, it'd take the Capital at least a year to dispatch specially trained troops. In the meantime, folks out in the villages would have to live with the fear that their brothers or sisters, children or parents might pop a pair of fangs at any minute. The number of victims would probably be up in the tens of thousands."

The explanation his left hand offered wasn't far fetched; it was absolutely correct. It was said there were hundreds of people in the same line of work as D on the Frontier, and even sick and weakened, he would leave them all dead if they came after him. The left hand had no doubt that such would be the case.

"At any rate, I recommend staying here till you're better," the hoarse

voice declared, adding after a momentary pause, “What the hell? It’s the door again.”

From the way D actually looked over, it appeared he was recovering from the sunlight syndrome, but it also supplied proof that he still suffered greatly from the malady. His ears hadn’t caught the faint creak of the door opening, nor had his skin or any other senses detected the presence beyond it.

Just as he grabbed the longsword leaning against the left side of the bed with his right hand, something was lobbed into the room. It was a black sphere about four inches in diameter. There was nothing nimble about its movements as it sloppily rolled twice in the Hunter’s direction, then halted. At the same time, the world filled with flapping black wings.

III

“Bats!” the hoarse voice cried. “If these are vampire bats that’ll attack a dhampir, this has gotta be some kind of mutated biological weapon. Watch yourself!”

In the time it took to say this, the room had filled with hundreds of flitting black shapes. But just listen closely. The flapping sounds suddenly vanished in one spot, a new shape filled the void, and then it too disappeared. It was right over the bed.

D’s right hand held his sword. Every time he swung it, the shapes bearing down on him were cut in twain, carpeting the floor and bed. However, one narrowly slipped past the tip of the blade and clung to D’s right shoulder—only the sunlight syndrome could have made such a thing possible. Twin streams of blood coursed from the tiny fangs of the bat when the left hand wrested it free.

The bellhops who came running after a call through the speaking tube were cleaning up the dead bats when D went down to the lobby. As he recovered, his skin was even drier than the sunlight syndrome had left it, yet he was sweating profusely. He was so emaciated that when he told the man at the front desk he was checking out, his words took the man’s breath away. The fangs of those bats secreted a toxin that would kill a normal human instantaneously.

Naturally, D left the hotel to avoid any other assassins. Everyone who worked there said they didn’t know anything about any bat expert. And the Hunter knew just from looking at them that they weren’t lying. It almost seemed as if the assassin who’d come to their door without D or his left hand noticing had flown away just like a bat.

On stepping out the front door, he was greeted by stark sunlight. Neither the grass nor the ground could possibly soak up all the sun’s heat, and the Hunter’s nose was assailed by what seemed like the odor of them burning. The smell of the dirt was even stronger than that of the

grass. Down an otherwise deserted street, a wagon loaded with modified barley rolled on creaking wheels.

Hotels were vital to Frontier villages. The bare dirt road, empty even of gravel, bore the hoof prints of horses and cattle and ruts from tires, and across the street from the hotel a general store and a saloon of weathered wood stood shoulder to shoulder. Nevertheless, the hotel must've been rather important to the area, as it had a nice large neon sign to draw attention. When the season came, the market at the edge of town would host merchants hoping to attract customers from dozens of surrounding villages for a bustling summer trade.

Going into the stable that stood beside the hotel, D put the saddle on his cyborg horse. Someone's shadow stretched in through the doorway, melding with those of D and his steed.

"Heading out?" a woman inquired in a voice that rang like a bell. A bell made of iron.

D didn't even glance at her crimson cape or the gentle waves of her black hair.

"Never in one place long, are you?" said Lyra.

After checking that his saddle was properly secured, D put one foot into a stirrup.

"Would you help us out?" D heard Lyra say as he settled into the saddle. On the left side of her chest, a gold badge was pinned against the curve of her breast. Her star was a little different from Rust's because she was only a deputy.

"With what?"

"Come on, you know. It's what you came here for. Seems there was a ruckus over at the hotel. You must know who was gunning for you."

D tugged on the reins.

Lyra stroked the horse's neck.

"See, someone fed the mayor's office a load of horseshit. Somebody with links to the Black Death gang. They'll be coming soon. And when they do, we want people on our side that we can count on. Rust just wants to hold them off with the locals who are up to a fight, but I'm sure you know how bad these villagers can be about switching sides."

D said something strange: "The sheriff told me you two would be leaving at some point. Seems like the sooner, the better."

Lyra's expression changed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

The Hunter's cyborg horse started forward. The woman in the red cape stood in front of him. D's steed kept going.

"Why are you in the way?"

Lyra's eyes narrowed. She'd suddenly heard a hoarse voice, but there was no one there save D.

"Because we need you! We can't trust the villagers."

"Then hire yourself some traveling warriors, eh? There were a bunch of 'em in the hotel and out at the campground for the down on their

luck."

Giving a suspicious look to the vicinity of D's hip, the woman in crimson said, "Let me rephrase that. *People* can't be trusted. Not upstanding people, anyway."

"You can say that again," more than one voice concurred.

The cyborg horse halted.

Not even bothering to turn, Lyra asked somewhat distastefully, "What can we do for you, Mr. Mayor?" In some respects, her tone was even colder than D's.

"Well, I've been giving some thought to what we discussed," the gray-haired old man said to the Hunter, giving a toss of his chin at the girl to his left wearing a striped jacket. "On my daughter's recommendation, I've decided to appoint you as deputy. I'm sure you'll be happy to accept, won't you?"

It was an extremely shortsighted offer. Given D's present condition, he'd be as likely to lop off someone's head as their nose. The Hunter merely advanced on his steed.

"Pardon my father's rudeness," the girl—Sheryl—said as she stepped forward. Her eyes needled D with a look of sincerity. "I'll admit that as a mayor, his personality leaves something to be desired. However, he's absolutely correct in this case. Lend us your aid. You'll be properly compensated, of course."

"Oh, no!"

The hoarse reply made Sheryl's eyes go wide. "You won't do it, then?"

"No, that's not it," Lyra said, her cape flaring as she started toward the cyborg horse just as D's body slowly pitched to the left and fell to the ground.

Everyone raced over, but one of them stopped in her tracks and turned toward the entrance. Darkness had laid claim to the stable. The thick wooden doors had slid from either side and slammed together.

Lyra had leapt forward with incredible speed, but they'd shut right in front of her with a crash that shook the whole stable. Just as she was about to collide with them, Lyra twisted around and stopped before glaring at the doors. She didn't punch or kick at them—there was no sense wasting the energy. That wasn't what a professional did.

"What's the meaning of this?" the mayor inquired. Though the doors had closed, there were plenty of windows, so it was still more than bright enough to see.

"We've got hostiles outside. How's he doing?" Lyra asked, turning to Sheryl, who had her hand against D's brow.

"He's really running a fever. We've got to get him to the doctor right away," she said.

The medical center in town was operated by a circuit physician. The village had no permanent doctor, but they would periodically employ a

traveling one. Circuit physicians included independently operating individuals, members of small Frontier medical associations, and doctors dispatched from the Capital. They might provide treatment in a given village for as little as a few hours, or for as long as six months. The third such doctor to come to the village had already been there for more than three months.

"Who in the world is outside?" asked Sheryl.

"Like I said, hostiles. People with a score to settle with me, or you and your dad, or maybe the super stud there."

Lyra looked up at the ceiling. There was a big window open on the wall directly in front of her. When she bounded up for it, she looked like a crimson falling star flying in reverse. However, as she easily reached the window more than fifteen feet off the ground, her body instantly warped like a TV signal rocked by interference. With a base grunt of pain, Lyra was thrown backward. Executing a flip in midair, she managed to gracefully land feet first.

"*Lyra?*"

As if in response to Sheryl's cry, the warrior woman stood up straight, and then twisted again. Her eyes stretched wide, her mouth shrank down to a dot, and the fingers of her elongated hands grew about as long as she was tall.

"Don't come near me," Lyra said, her voice echoing on top of itself. It, too, was warped. "They've got a spatial distorter. Everyone, gather in the middle. And don't touch anything!"

"But what about him?"

"Forget about the infirm. You have to look out for yourself. Hurry up!"

“Let’s go, Sheryl!” the mayor said, his arm around her shoulder, but when the girl stood up, the scene around them began to change.

The ceiling and three of the walls were warping. Noticing the strange transformation, the horses tethered in the back began whinnying. Then they stopped unexpectedly.

Turning to look at them, Sheryl let out a scream.

Even the horses had been distorted. And the boards that partitioned each animal into a separate stall rolled and bulged like the picture on a poorly tuned TV. The horses were no longer horses at all. With twisted muzzles, legs dripping like molasses, and barrels stretched like serpents, the creatures that stood there were truly bizarre.

“The horses and the walls—they’re all running together!”

“Can’t you do anything, Deputy?” the mayor shouted, stomping his feet indignantly.

“There *is* something I could try,” Lyra replied, her words distorted.

“What might that be?”

“I could hit this field head on. That might do something.”

The color draining from her face, Sheryl shouted at her to stop. “If you did that, you’d be obliterated!”

“That goes with the territory,” Lyra said, her body shaking. The distortion suddenly disappeared—apparently, the spatial distorter hadn’t had a permanent effect yet. Pointing at D, she continued, “I think you’re gonna be fine. If I don’t make it, get him to do whatever needs to be done. And don’t, under any circumstances, allow him to just leave.”

Sheryl didn’t know what to say to that.

“Well, here goes nothing.”

Twisting her upper body around, Lyra poised herself for a running start.

The wind struck her face.

“What’s going on here?” Sheryl exclaimed as the ever-changing stable quaked.

And behold! The ceiling and walls puckered at their centers, rising in a funnel shape before squeezing down into a single stream that was sucked into a spot just a bit off the ground—the palm of D’s left hand, which had been raised off the ground. Who would’ve believed that the tiny mouth that opened on its surface could suck up that distortion field?

The sky howled. The ground quaked. So great was the force of the wind, it left all of them clutching the very hair on their heads. They weren’t overreacting—the wind threatened to yank it from their scalps. The howl of the ferocious gale died, and a second later light filled their world.

The three of them stood out in the stark light of the summer sun. The roof, the walls, and even the horses in the stable had been destroyed. Now they were confronted by four people standing on a familiar street.

Three were huge fellows in their forties, while the last was still young. He couldn't have been more than seventeen or eighteen. A device about the size of a hardcover book hung from a strap around his neck. With a troubled look on his face, the young man backed away.

"What the hell are you doing?" one of the others barked at him.

"I don't believe it. The distortion field just disappeared!"

"Isn't that a pity!" Lyra said, stepping forward. Her crimson garb was like the very killing lust that enshrouded her.

"Die, fucker!" one of the men cried, drawing the longsword from his hip and taking a swipe at her with it. It had the razor-sharp tip one would expect from someone who spilled blood for a living, but Lyra parried it with her own blade fresh from its sheath.

There was a mellifluous sound, and the sword flew out of the man's hand. As if it'd been planned that way, the errant blade plunged straight into the head of the second man, who was charging toward Lyra. It split him open down to his upper lip.

As the second man fell in a bloody mist, the third ran past him, his right hand raised high. The short spear he sent knifing through the air sank into Lyra's heart.

THE TARGETED VILLAGE

CHAPTER 2

I

Lyra let out a scream. It was a terrifying moment. The force of the impact spun the warrior woman's body a full 360 degrees. Something shot from her chest, piercing the third man through the base of the throat and poking out again from the top of his head. Catching the short spear the man had hurled, Lyra had launched it right back. Her scream was intended to make her opponent drop his guard.

As her body spun around, it suddenly warped like a mirage. Without a word, she tumbled forward. Even the blade of the sword she attempted to use as a crutch twisted as if it were rubber.

"Die!" the man whose sword she'd batted away shouted as he dashed past the younger man operating the device. The blade he raised to strike had belonged to one of his cohorts. He was close enough that a slash would cut the woman in two—but then the man jammed on the brakes. With eyes thrown open wide, the man's face now wore a corpselike rictus. "No . . . No, it can't be . . . You're—" The man's mouth opened and closed like a gasping fish, the words that spilled from it formed by the realization of his fate.

Sheryl and the mayor turned and looked.

"—D," the man croaked.

The young man in black took a smooth stride forward. His gait was filled with strength. However, his eyes were bloodshot, and sweat dripped to the ground from his chin. Although his foe looked like he was about to die of fright, the Hunter looked like he was about to die of an illness.

"Waste 'im, Goro!" the older man shouted to the young man, who was just as paralyzed as he was. Running over, he took cover behind the younger man's back.

As if freed from the spell that'd bound him, the young man reached for his keyboard with his right hand. But a death bird spread its wings above him. Though he looked up in fear, the beauty of it left the young man enraptured. Even after he was split from the top of his head down through the chin, his face still wore a look akin to yearning. Falling in a bloody mist, his body had been split in two. The man behind him had also tasted D's blade. The body that lay on the ground was pelted by a bloody rain.

Not even glancing at the other men who lay there in the stark sunlight, D went over to the young man's corpse and used the tip of his sword to flick off the power switch.

With a thin cry of pain, Lyra returned to her normal form. Staggering, she used her sword as a crutch to get to her feet, and then

surveyed her surroundings. Looking at D, she said, “Seems I’ve been rescued by an invalid.”

But the warrior woman’s eyes glowed with contempt when they focused on the mayor and his daughter, standing stock still where the stable had once been. Although they lived in a rough Frontier village, the pair had just seen a deadly battle played out that undoubtedly seemed like a waking nightmare.

“Now, I don’t want to seem like I’m complaining or anything,” Lyra said, looking down at the corpses of the first man and the youngest one, “but wouldn’t we have been better off leaving one of them alive?”

“Well, you had *him* right in front of you,” D said, turning his gaze to the crimson-stained young man. “But you didn’t cut him down. And it almost got you killed.”

Lyra had no response to that.

“Age has no bearing on what someone’s capable of. A fire dragon’s young will blow flames at its parents from the first second it breaks out of its egg. Out on the Frontier, even a child of three can stab somebody through the heart.”

Choking down the emotion that was building in her chest, Lyra nodded. “You’re right. I screwed up.” Turning to the mayor, she asked, “Recognize them?”

“No, they’re not from around here.”

“Drifters. I’ll go check with the hotel.”

From down the street, there was the sound of an engine drawing nearer. It was a skeleton vehicle, little more than a driver’s seat set on a bare frame with wheels that looked like three barrels lashed together. Not only was it capable of navigating even the roughest terrain, but it could also hit speeds of up to sixty miles per hour. It’d probably been purchased from a traveling merchant, and the rear seats had been ripped out and replaced with square missile launchers. The rockets’ yellow warheads poked from the circular launch tubes. Stretching back from the bulletproof tank beneath the driver’s seat like a fat silver serpent, the exhaust pipe was twice the normal size. It was fueled not by gasoline, but rather by a variety of fungus cultivated on a massive scale all across the Frontier.

Halting the vehicle in front of the annihilated stables, the sheriff hopped down. On seeing the rooted group and the remains of the stables, he asked, “What have we here?” As the mayor was one of them, the lawman’s tone was rather polite.

Lyra gave him a brief rundown of the incident. The hotel’s manager and bellhops rushed to the scene, informing them that the men hadn’t been patrons of theirs, but rather had been staying in tents at the campsite to the west of town.

“Probably killers who move around from town to town. But who hired them, and who were they after?”

After ordering the manager and his bellhops to bring the bodies back to the hotel's barn, the sheriff cocked his head to one side. "At any rate, I'll thank you all to head back to my office."

No sooner did he say this than out of the corner of his eye he saw the figure in black slowly and beautifully sink to the ground.

When D regained consciousness, it was just after noon of the next day—and he was in the sheriff's office.

"I heard about the bat incident at the hotel, too," the sheriff said, gazing at the now-awake D with a strained look. But his eyes were only half open. It wouldn't do for him to focus on the Hunter. "It's possible that scene at the stables was another attempt against you. Until we can make a complete inquiry, I need you to stay here. Fortunately, we already have accommodations."

"If you need to know the circumstances, I can tell you them now."

"No, we couldn't have that. According to the doctor, you need ten days' rest, with no talking."

"That doctor's a quack."

"Don't be ridiculous. He's quite reputable, and better than a hick village like this deserves. We have complete faith in him. Just relax and get better, now."

"Hey . . ."

"Sorry, but we'll hold on to your weapon. You're a key player in this."

"A key player isn't the same as a prime suspect. There's no need to disarm me," D protested, not without reason.

"This town has a special ordinance about that. Enacted quite recently, actually."

"Just when are we talking about?"

"This afternoon. It was approved by a village assembly."

"Who proposed it, you?"

"Yes, me—and the mayor."

"Give me back my weapon. I'll be leaving right away."

As D tried to get out of the creaking bed, darkness enveloped him. It was the combined aftereffects of the sunlight syndrome and the venom from the mutated bats.

As D managed to lie down again, Rust gave him a troubled look, saying, "Now, don't be that way. At any rate, get some rest. The questioning will wait till later."

And with that, the sheriff locked the door and left.

Though he was in a tidy little room, apparently it was also used as a cell, and it had iron bars across the windows.

"This is a fine mess, eh?" said the hoarse voice. Despite the topic of conversation, it sounded quite buoyant. "Seems like they're hell bent on having you as a deputy. If they wanted to, they could even use drugs.

That sheriff's a real piece of work."

"How soon can I move?"

"My gut feeling is the doctor's prognosis was on the money. Not for ten days."

"Do it in three."

"Hmph! You always want miracles. Make it five. Any less, and the aftereffects will be with you for a long time."

Nothing from D.

"You'll just have to be patient. Wouldn't you be better off playing along with them instead of being sick for ages?"

"Probably."

"Okay, then the rest is just a matter of negotiations. Leave that to me. I'll make us enough to cover travel expenses for a year. You keep out of it."

"I'll leave it to you."

"Good. Hey, Sheriff! I wanna talk to you. Get in here!" the hoarse voice cried, its tone on par with the blast of an explosion.

Beyond the window, a woman's scream rang out. It appeared that his room faced the road. A short time later, the door was jerked open.

"What's this?" said the hoarse voice.

The crimson cape seemed to dye the entire figure red.

"The sheriff's gone out on patrol. What do you want?"

"Well, he certainly gets around," D murmured softly.

"I've decided to take you folks up on your offer," the hoarse voice said in a magnanimous tone. "First, let me tell you my conditions."

"Where's that voice coming from?" Lyra inquired coolly.

"What do you mean? From my throat, of course," the left hand said, pointing toward D's mouth.

Lyra's look was one of utter suspicion. "There's something odd about all this."

"Wh—what's that supposed to mean?" the hoarse voice sputtered.

"What's it pay?" D asked.

Lyra stood bolt upright. Blinking, she replied, "Oh, that'd be the same as my pay. Eighty dalas a month."

Snorting with laughter, the hoarse voice said, "You must be freaking kidding me! You're looking at a guy who can pull down a million or two in bounty in one day. Who'd work for that pittance?"

"A sheriff only makes fifty dalas. This is an extremely generous offer."

"Okay, good enough," said the hoarse voice.

D furrowed his brow ever so slightly.

Lyra continued, "But eighty dalas is just the base pay. Every time you put down some trouble in town you get an extra ten dalas, and if you arrest a wanted party, it's twenty more."

"How much trouble was there last year?" asked D.

“According to the logs, only three incidents. A drunken scuffle, a domestic dispute caused by a cheating spouse, and getting rid of a stray dog.”

“And since you signed on?”

“I took a baker into protective custody after he was stabbed in the ass with a knife.”

“What was that all about?”

“He came home drunk in the wee hours and went into the wrong house. As luck would have it, the man of the house had also been out at the saloon drinking. The baker went into the bedroom without even bothering to turn on the lights.”

There was some stifled but hoarse laughter as the Hunter’s left hand pictured what ensued.

“To make matters worse, it was only about twenty minutes later that the woman’s husband got home.”

“And what does he do for a living?”

“He sharpens cutlery.”

“Now that’s what you call destiny!” the hoarse voice replied.

“Would you knock it off with the ventriloquism,” Lyra snapped.

“Oh, you could tell?”

“Of course so. The least you could do is make it a more pleasant-sounding voice.”

“I wish I could,” D confessed.

“So, you’re fine with eighty dalas?”

“It’s not like I have a choice.”

“Well, in return, we’ll pay you for the whole month even though you don’t start working for another ten days.”

“That’ll be fine.”

His expression hardly suited the young man. It was like being thanked by a gorgeous Grim Reaper. And there were undoubtedly more than a few people who wouldn’t mind meeting the Grim Reaper, if he were this exquisite.

“Then it’s settled.”

Suddenly, the door opened and Rust came in.

The hoarse voice gasped in surprise.

II

“You’ll be a really great help to us. I’ll go easy on you when it comes time for questioning,” the sheriff said brazenly.

“You mean to tell me you weren’t out on patrol at all?” the hoarse voice spat back angrily.

“I had to play it this way. Lyra’s a lot better at these negotiations than I am. And I bet you enjoyed talking with her a lot more than if it’d been me, am I right?”

The stone-faced D said to him, “Undo that bandanna.”

“Excuse me?”

“Untie it.”

“Sure thing.” Slapping his sun-bronzed neck, the sheriff said, “You don’t see any Noble’s fang marks there, do you?”

D continued, “Just so we’re clear, I apparently won’t be able to work for another ten days. In the meantime, I won’t be any use to you.”

“That’s okay. According to our latest information, the Black Death won’t be coming for at least a month. That’s when we’ll get some work out of you. With the man called D on our side, we could defend a village three times the size of this one.”

“Don’t underestimate them.”

Lyra nodded at that, saying, “He’s right, Rust—I mean, Sheriff. You’ve seen the villages they’ve hit.”

Silence fell, as if the whole world had frozen over. Rust’s hand slowly rose, reaching for the persimmon-orange fabric that covered the nape of his neck.

“Rust,” Lyra said to him. Her voice had a stern, commanding ring, not a tone used between equals.

“I sure have.” Moving the hand from the base of his throat to his hair, Rust scratched his head. “Corpses lying all around, inside and out. Men and women, young and old, all with their throats ripped open. Some of the bodies got their wounds from blades, and others from teeth. And all of it done by human beings—no, by those bastard victims of the Nobility—pseudo vampires!”

His voice was choked with emotion, and a terrible gleam filled his eyes. Both testified to his madness. There was no trace of the courteous sheriff.

“Keep a handle on it, Rust,” Lyra told him.

Nodding, Rust wiped the sweat from his brow. It was a pointless act. Perspiration poured from him with a vengeance. Repeatedly he wiped it away. And as he did so, the shadow of madness gradually began to leave him.

“Sorry you had to see that,” he said.

“You must be tired,” the hoarse voice said sarcastically. It didn’t seem to bother Rust.

Taking several ragged breaths, the sheriff continued, “I’ve been able to ID the ones who wiped out the stables.”

“Oh? That’s pretty quick work for a hick sheriff!” said the hoarse voice.

When outsiders committed a crime, inquiries about them had to be made in surrounding towns and villages, and in some cases even the Capital, which usually took a week at the very least.

Giving the names of all four, the sheriff said they were drifters and hit men. They had no connection to the pseudo vampire’s gang. It was

probably the mayor, rather than D, that they'd been gunning for.

"He's a real wheeler-dealer. In fact, the reason he hired me was because he heard I'd slapped down about a dozen drifters who were raising hell in the saloon. On the way here, did you notice the strange way the highway twists?"

D nodded.

"Originally, it ran straight. Until . . . Until he became mayor, that is. Being off the highway, this village was a desolate place. Not only did he get the road to curve so it ran right up to the village, but he took it upon himself to dub it the Geneve Highway and got it to intersect with the Alasmian Highway. In other words, he forced this village into a place of importance. Thanks to him, the village prospered, but violence began to increase, too. The mayor has a lot of friends, and more than a few enemies. Normally that'd bother some people, but he doesn't care. Apparently he's a shoo-in for another term. The deputy mayor's looking to succeed him, so he's none too pleased about that. He's tried all kinds of tricks up until now, but he's just not made of the same stuff. Everyone thought he'd finally thrown in the towel. Now, it seems that's not the case."

Rust smiled wryly, making the meaning of his last remark clear.

"We've learned who they were, but not who hired them. I wish one of 'em had been left alive, but there was no way around that. They bit off more than they could chew." The sheriff scratched the back of his head. "If I might share my own personal opinion—since you've already signed on with us—the person who went after you with the bats presents more of a problem than the antimayor faction. We're talking bats here—a symbol of the Nobility."

"Do you have any idea who it was, D?" Lyra inquired, her expression rather grave.

"The strongest possibility is that it was someone who doesn't want me sticking around."

"An agent of the pseudo vampire?"

"Could be."

"Have they already found their way in?" Rust said, pounding his fist into the palm of his left hand. "Well, I figured it might be any time now. We're gonna have to do a thorough check again on everyone from outside."

"You've already checked on them?" the Hunter inquired.

"Three days ago," Lyra replied.

"Hmm."

"If we don't check them out, we'll never get to the bottom of this. Let's go over 'em again," the sheriff said, eyes brimming with determination.

"What'll you do about the drifters?" D asked him.

"That's the problem. It's impossible to verify their identities."

“At any rate, we just have to smoke one of them out,” D said.

“I suppose so, but . . .”

“You have a gun?”

“Yeah,” Rust replied, placing his hand against his right hip. Ranged weapons were extremely valuable out on the Frontier. Even among sheriffs, there were few who owned them.

“Shoot out the windowpane.”

“What for? That’s town property.”

“Take it out of my pay.”

“I get you,” Lyra said, walking over to the window. Drawing a dagger, she used the pommel to smash the glass.

“You still don’t get it?” asked the Hunter.

“Nope,” the sheriff replied, shaking his head. “You trying to get them to come after you again?”

“Don’t give me any special treatment. Bring me meals like usual, and question me like you ordinarily would. I won’t leave the place. Let word trickle out that I’ll be helping you.”

“Understood. You’ll be a great assistance. Thanks.”

D gazed quietly at the lawman’s smiling and carefree visage.

“Okay, let’s get right to it. We’re off, Lyra.”

“Just a second,” the warrior woman said, turning to D. “You said we just had to smoke *one* of them out. What do you mean by that?”

“Surely you know.”

“That there are several others lurking in town?”

“That’s the way they always work. If need be, they’ll enter a village a year in advance and earn the locals’ trust just so they can help the rest of the gang get in.”

“That’s been the downfall of many a village,” said Lyra.

She and the sheriff looked at each other and then left.

“They’re quite a pair,” the hoarse voice said to the Hunter. “What do you make of this?”

“I think he has a handle on it,” D said, looking in the direction of the window. “But soon there’ll be the scent of fresh blood in the air. That’ll be the test.”

“And that’s part of why he hired you? He’s got a strong sense of responsibility.”

“Yeah. And he got a great bargain.”

Chortling, the hoarse voice replied, “Oh, don’t say such things. You’re a sucker for folks like that.”

“Don’t think of him and the girl as a nice little couple, okay?”

“What?” the hoarse voice exclaimed, but it got no reply.

D’s eyes reflected the blue skies of summer. Perhaps to him they looked blood red.

“How are you doing?” Lyra called over to the sheriff from the back

of her cyborg horse, which she rode alongside his vehicle as it progressed with the leisurely speed of a motorized tractor. They were on a path between the fields. Less than five minutes had passed since they left the sheriff's office. Golden waves of barley rippled to either side of them. White clouds scudded across the heavens, and the forests were breathtakingly green. As it was summer, the clumps of trees were lush with foliage.

"You needn't worry about it," Rust replied.

"I hope so."

"I'm fine—but wouldn't it be better if I wasn't?" Rust said, turning ever so slightly toward the warrior woman in crimson.

Lyra remained facing forward as she replied, "I suppose. Then I could conclude our business."

Rust's eyes were colored by a certain emotion. A sense of complete desolation. "It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

"It sure has."

"But this is probably the end. I just have that feeling."

"You said that four years ago in the village of Langel, too."

Rust grinned wryly, scratching the back of his head. "Did I? Well, this time looks like it'll *really* be it."

Nothing from the warrior.

"If possible, I want you to finish me, Lyra. Just like we agreed."

"When the time comes, I will—as agreed."

Although his eyes had already shifted forward again, Rust could tell that Lyra had nodded. Her everyday expression was cold, but he knew it reflected a feeling as desolate as his own. Rust choked back the emotions rising in him, as he always did. He had a job to do as sheriff. At the very least, he'd have to ride along and check the wall around the village before nightfall.

Most of the sections of wall around the center of the village were man-made structures, but the section to the north was a natural feature —a wall of rock ten feet thick and over thirty feet high. It'd probably been thrust up by some ancient movement of the earth's crust, and including the portion that remained buried, it had to weigh in the hundreds of millions of tons. This village was said to have much stronger defenses than any other, and they prided themselves on that northern section in particular as being impregnable. Rust and Lyra really didn't have to go check on the northern wall, of all places. But the two of them went out there just to be on the safe side, as was entirely proper, given that they were the law here. The rock wall ran for a mile and a quarter across plains, through the forest, and between paddies. In places it was a single layer of rock; in others multiple layers were stacked together like a sheaf of paper, making clear to all who saw the wall the sheer power of Mother Nature. The western corner of the rock wall was surrounded by deep woods.

As they approached the end of their rounds, Rust declared, “All clear.”

“For the time being,” Lyra added as the sun went down in the west. As blue tinged the air, Lyra suggested, “I suppose we should start thinking about who to post as guards on the wall. Drifters and mercenaries will be coming in soon. So long as they get paid, they’ll do what they’re told. If the Black Death gang’s got sixty people, we’ll need at least twenty. The rest we’ll manage to cover with folks from the village. To save their own skins and everything they own, they’ll fight pretty much down to the wire.”

“If it looks like we’re going to lose, you know both of us will probably get it in the back.”

“Well, you don’t get to choose how you go.”

“Isn’t that the truth,” Rust said, a bitter grin rising on his lips.

At that instant, a black sphere came from nowhere and landed between the two of them. When it hit the ground, it transformed into hundreds of black bats, but by that point the pair had galloped a good thirty feet away.

“Must be the same person who went after D,” Rust groaned.

“Now it’s us they’re after,” Lyra laughed bitterly. Above her, she heard flapping wings drawing closer.

Lyra’s right hand flashed into action. Drawn from its sheath without a sound, her longsword limned an arc through the air, and a dozen or more bisected bats fell to the ground.

“Ugh!” Rust groaned sharply.

One of the bats was trying to sink its fangs into him through his bandanna. If the venom entered his bloodstream, he’d meet the same fate as D.

“Just hold on, Rust!” Lyra shouted to him.

Tearing the bat off, Rust threw it away. Its fangs hadn’t reached his skin.

“No, I can’t,” the sheriff replied, his tone low and morose. He looked up at the writhing ball of darkness formed by the flapping wings. “Besides, it’s the only way the two of us will ever get out of here. Lyra—stop me again!”

Dozens of the flying creatures swooped down toward his neck and back.

Twisting around, Rust looked up. The black cloud of winged demons that’d blotted out even the darkness had suddenly vanished. They’d flown away like a shot from a gun.

The moon in the night sky glowed ever brighter.

III

“Rust?”

“Stay back.”

His vehicle growled, the roar echoing from its exhaust pipe. As Lyra gave a kick to the flanks of her cyborg horse and put some distance between them, the sheriff vanished into the depths of the forest.

Lyra poured on the speed as a cry reached her ears. Saying nothing, she galloped on. The moonlight made her lovely face glisten like a death mask.

She spotted the skeleton vehicle parked among the trees. In what could only be described as a lithe movement, Lyra leapt down from her cyborg horse before it’d come to a halt. She quickly surveyed her surroundings. Her nose had already caught the scent of blood. Before she could ascertain where it came from, a voice called from the trees to her right, “Over here.”

Circling around the front of the vehicle, Lyra headed toward the source of the voice. The warrior’s eyes could see through the pitch-black darkness as if it were midday.

Rust stood with a short bow in hand, and at his feet lay a figure in black.

“How on earth did you—”

“Don’t worry about that,” Rust assured her. His face was hidden by the darkness. “It wasn’t me. See for yourself.”

Lyra squatted down beside the shocking remains of the corpse. The stink of blood was incomparably worse than before, assailing her stomach right through her nose, putrid enough to make a strong man vomit.

“He’s been cut to ribbons. And his head’s been lopped off, too.”

“It sure as hell has,” Rust replied in a muffled tone.

“I’ll check into this,” Lyra said. “You’d better keep your distance.”

“Okay.”

Going behind a tree about thirty feet away, Rust leaned back against its massive trunk. Both hands covered his face, as if it were melting. He shook violently from the spasms racing through every inch of his body, the result of his maddening hunger and thirst. His teeth chattered. Jamming his fist between them, he fought the urge.

When he’d finally overcome it, he heard Lyra say beside him, “Rust?”

Though she’d approached with completely silent footsteps, Rust must’ve been used to her ways, because he didn’t seem at all surprised as he asked, “What’d you find?” He was still panting.

“The murder weapon wasn’t a sword.”

“What was it?”

“A butcher knife. And a big, heavy one at that. Depending on the user, it could do worse damage than a sword.”

“Any clues?”

“Nope. You didn’t see anyone?”

“I didn’t even hear anyone running off.”

"That's the guy who attacked D," she said, referring to the victim.

"You sure?"

"In his shirt, he had a ton of dried blood cake—bat food."

"If he was killed, then, as unlikely as it seems, it might've been a falling-out between coconspirators. If not, there wouldn't have been any need for the person who did this to run off," Rust said, his voice carrying a secret fear.

A fiend who could control mutated vampire bats had been slain in a matter of seconds. It didn't seem likely that he and his killer had met by chance in the forest at this hour. The bat master's death had been sudden—an ambush by one of his cohorts. That still left the cause of the falling-out a mystery, but he and Lyra would look into that next.

Rust continued, "The deceased—"

"He was one of the travelers camped out on the edge of town. His killer probably hasn't had a chance to take off yet. I'll ride on ahead."

"No, I'll go," the sheriff said.

"But you're . . ."

"I've got to get used to this, Lyra. I need to if I'm going to live here."

Nothing from the warrior woman.

"Besides, I'm the sheriff."

A few seconds passed, but to the two of them, it seemed like an eternity.

"Okay," Lyra said, walking back the way she'd come.

About ten minutes later, Rust's vehicle sped off, leaving just as the warrior woman was beginning a more thorough investigation of the area around the corpse.

When he came to the sheriff's office, Rust hit the brakes. The heavy tires kicked up dirt, almost coming to a stop—and then they sped up.

"I'd hate to ask that of a sick man," Rust said, grinning as he fought something in his turbulent heart. His smirk was directed at himself and his own weakness, which was forcing him to rely on D.

On the western edge of the village were three vacant lots of about four hundred square yards each, where travelers looking to economize on their lodgings had set up camp. There was a little campfire burning on the nearest lot. The smell of roasting meat drifted through the air. Rust thought back on the bustling dining room and saloon he'd passed on his way out there. This village would probably be raised to the rank of a full-fledged town soon.

There were seven figures around the campfire. They were all sucking down coffee, wine, or nutrient drinks. Having taken a horse instead of the skeleton vehicle, Rust hitched it to a post by the road and headed over to the campfire with his right hand still tucked in his coat.

"One of the guys who was out here has been arrested." Looking over the faces that turned in his direction, Rust continued in a stern tone,

“He’s got cohorts. Who was with him?”

All the faces that had faced him looked away again. You couldn’t live very long as a drifter on the Frontier if you worried too much about what local lawmen had to say.

There was no answer. One of them took a bottle of booze away from his lips and drew a deep breath.

“I’ve got no choice, then. You’ll all have to come with me. We’ve got a lie detector back at the sheriff’s office.”

This time he got a reply.

“What’s a kid like you want?”

“You want some milk, is that it?”

“If you don’t mind an old man like me, you can come over and suck on my titty—how about that?”

They exploded in laughter.

Still chortling, one of them picked up a bottle of booze. “What the—” he exclaimed, holding the bottle at arm’s length. His laughter had become a cry of shock. An iron arrow had been shot through the bottle.

“Wh—when the hell did you . . .” the middle-aged man sputtered, having fallen back on the ground before trying to inch away.

“You’re coming with me,” Rust declared in a firm tone.

The men rose in unison—not that they were ready to comply. Rather, each of them was going for the weapons on their hips or backs.

“You little punk!”

As one of them grabbed his longsword and kicked off the ground, the giant of a man beside him drew back on his short bow. The wind whistled, and the man with the longsword let out a cry as he grabbed his right shoulder. At the same time, a strident sound rang out.

The man with the short bow gaped. He’d fired an arrow at the sheriff, but it’d vanished. No, it’d been *deflected*. By an arrow Rust had shot.

“Freeze,” the lawman snapped, short bow in hand, and this time it had the desired effect. “There was a guy out here who could control bats. Varroa was the name. Who was with him?”

The men exchanged glances. Giving Rust a look of suspicion, a plump, bearded fellow said, “You’ve got it all wrong, Sheriff. He was by himself from the very start.”

“Don’t lie to me!”

“Did that fucker try something?”

“He attacked me, and he got killed.”

Scratching roughly at his stubbly neck, a different man in a red shirt said, “When you say he got himself killed, don’t you mean *you* killed him?” He was squinting at the lawman.

“He had a falling-out with his cohorts. That’s why I’m out here.”

Pursing his lips, the man in the red shirt said, “You’re talking about a falling-out, but he never said a word to any of us.”

“He sure didn’t!” another man said, pointing to the far end of the vacant lot. “He hardly ever even came out of that tent of his. If he had any friends, maybe they were in there.”

By Rust’s estimation, they weren’t lying to him. After telling some of them to take their wounded friend to the medical center and ordering the man with the short bow to leave town immediately, he investigated Varroa’s tent. He found nothing there except the bare essentials for survival. If the man had made contact with anyone in the village, he’d gone to great lengths to erase any evidence of it.

“Welcome home, dear,” Elena said, wiping her hands on her apron. Apparently the man’s wife had been right in the middle of washing some dishes.

Quickly putting the item he carried into a leather bag, the man inquired, “Agnus gone to bed already?”

“Oh yes, hours ago.”

“Yeah, I guess that’d be about right. What time is it now?”

Furrowing her brow, Elena replied, “Well, it must be around nine o’clock.”

“I’m starved. I ate the dinner you packed me, but it wasn’t enough.”

Elena stuck her smiling face out of the kitchen, saying, “Don’t you smell that, Billy?”

He then started to sniff. “A pie?”

“Right you are! A mountain-grape pie, to be exact. It’ll keep you filled for the next three days.”

Hugging his wife, Billy showered her with kisses.

“Whoa, slow down there—I mean it,” she said, her voice growing strained.

Billy’s heart stopped. “What’s wrong?” he asked, and though he tried to sound casual, his tone was probably a little tense.

Elena pressed her nose close to her husband’s collar. “Do you smell blood or something?”

“Oh, right. I cut through the hunting grounds. They were butchering a megamouth croc there. I probably got some of the smell on me,” he said in a rather composed voice. This time, Billy was sure of himself.

“You don’t say.” Satisfied, Elena pulled her head back, then walked away. “It’ll be finished baking any minute now.”

Giving a satisfied grunt, Billy watched his slender wife close the door again before opening the mouth of his bag and pulling out the object he’d tossed into it earlier. He knew he should’ve cleaned off all that blood. Going into the forest where he’d taken prey before, he’d found an unexpected target, but then he’d been rudely interrupted and he’d just managed to make his escape. Next time, he’d have to finish the whole thing properly.

He gazed at the bloodstained black steel with rapture. It was a

footlong butcher knife.

THE BLACK DEATH GANG

CHAPTER 3

I

A fact of life on the Frontier, outlaw groups had been described as a terror that stained the lives of peace-seeking villagers with vermilion fear. Each faction had its own character. Though there were some groups that merely plundered and would never kill, many others would mercilessly slaughter all save the women. The women would be sold to slave traders and taken to distant lands, where most of them were purchased by brothels. That was still better than some situations; at least they survived. About 70 percent of the outlaws who plagued the Frontier were heartless scum—demons that liked nothing better than to annihilate entire villages. Law-enforcement organizations formed patrols with considerable numbers of men and stationed peacekeeping forces at strategic points on the Frontier, but their efforts simply weren't concerted enough and their numbers were too few for a region so vast. Day after day, merciless fiends slipped through their fingers like water through a sieve, mocking the patrols and running rampant.

This is where the pseudo vampire's gang fell. If you were to ask even a two-year-old what they feared most, in more cases than not this brutally efficient gang would be the answer, and their dark, violent acts were beyond numbering. *Pseudo vampire* was a term used to describe people who'd been bitten by vampires but hadn't become true monsters—due either to some whim of the Noble or its destruction before the change was complete—leaving these victims stranded between life and death. Although such people were generally disposed of, either by their village's leadership or by its mobs, a few managed to escape, though fewer still were the ones who were spared the typical curse of the pseudo vampire—madness and an abhorrence of daylight. Though nothing compared to a genuine Noble, they still possessed monstrous strength equal to that of ten men and a fairly indestructible nature, able to live without food or drink as long as they had blood for sustenance. What's more, these fiends could move about in the midday sun like human beings, something Nobles and even dhampirs couldn't do.

And the pseudo vampire in question was cruel—packing harmless villagers, male and female, young and old, into huts before setting fire to them. Purposely killing children in front of their own parents. Letting the monsters he'd brought with him devour the children. Or, when he didn't feel like drinking blood, he would make parents fight their offspring or siblings fight each other—something his Noble blood enabled him to do.

He was also callous—on very rare occasions he'd have the poor luck to run headlong into a posse of lawmen, and when critically injured, the

pseudo vampire would leave his underlings there and escape alone. There were more than a hundred such incidents recorded. And generous—the pseudo vampire wasn't out for riches, or even sweet blood. Merciless and wholesale slaughter was what he desired, with the pillaging being done by his followers, and since the loot was as worthless as dirt to him, he let his underlings keep it all. It was due to this simple economic incentive that some people had no qualms about joining up with such a notoriously brutal group. They had dubbed themselves the Black Death gang. There were sixty of them, each a beast without compunction about killing women or children.

The day after the meat-cleaver killing, the outlaws reached the barren plains about thirty miles to the south of Geneve. As might be expected, it was a desolate and endless expanse of nothing save dirt. The winds that blew there were definitely far colder than in other places. The grasses that grew there were despised by the sun. And the people who lived there had surely been forsaken by God.

"Boss—there's a house!" one of the scouts riding at the front of the group shouted, pointing to a spot in the distant expanse of black. This was a man with eyes so sharp they could make out a pebble a dozen miles away in the darkness.

While his lieutenants around him brought antiquated binoculars up to their eyes, the man who'd been informed of the existence of the house only squinted a bit. "You're right," he said with a nod, his lieutenants shrugging their shoulders. They should've been used to this by now, as it was their leader's nature to respond in such a manner.

Actually, he was rather generous and an excellent leader. But that wasn't all it took to keep a band of godforsaken outlaws under a tenuous control. The only thing that could hold together men like this, who believed in strength alone, was an even greater power. This, their boss possessed. Because once, he'd been human. He'd had parents and siblings. He'd supported a wife and children. He'd been well liked by his neighbors. He'd had a taste for hard bread and cheese and venison steaks. He'd gotten up early in the morning, and gone to bed every evening. He'd prayed to God by the light of morn, and sworn at vespers' bells that he'd live his best again tomorrow. He'd had hopes and dreams.

But now, he was a pseudo vampire. He sat astride a black horse covered with iron plates, and those pieces of armor were etched with a hundred human skulls. His overgrown hair covered the right half of his face, while his constantly exposed left eye was eternally bloodshot, perhaps due to the sunlight. Lips that'd once pressed against those of the woman he loved had forgotten what that felt like, but they'd acquired a toxic vermilion hue after being smeared with the blood of more than a thousand—all human. For weapons, he had a pair of longswords crossed on his back that were the work of one of the southern Frontier's preeminent blacksmiths. The blades were forged of steel wrapped

around a high-density durium core, and in his hands they'd slashed a Noble in two and kept him from healing again.

And one thing more—he desired only blood. All nostalgia, all memories of kindnesses that'd been done to him had been driven into the far reaches of forgetfulness as hunger and a lust for murder grew with each passing day. In truth, what he desired more than blood was slaughter. It filled a hunger that burned seductively in the darkest depths of his psyche like a shadowy fire, stronger even than his physical hunger. The problem was that he tried his very best to ignore it. If he didn't acknowledge it, he could kill as many people as he liked without it ever bothering him.

"What'll we do, Boss?" the scout asked.

"The usual," he replied. That was his way of telling them he'd lead the charge.

"Yeah, but it's just one little house. Let us take care of it."

The leader knew very well his scout had no ulterior motives for saying that. "Okay," he said, his laughter freezing his faithful underling. "One little house out in the wilderness. People living where no human being should. Go right ahead."

In no time, three riders galloped away, kicking up the dark earth. Once they were in the distance, the leader told the rest of his gang to wait there, and then followed after the trio alone. Behind him, he could feel the tension growing in the group of more than fifty men.

When he was still about two hundred yards from the log cabin, he heard a gunshot. Several more followed, and then he heard a faint cry that made him give his steed's flanks a kick, conjecture as to the fate of his henchmen putting a callous grin on his lips.

As he got closer, the voices became clearer.

"What the hell *are* you?"

"No, stay back! Our boss is even tougher than you!"

"Help! Please, help me!"

Then there was a gunshot, and the sound of a table being knocked over.

Up on his steed, he panted a little. His expectation was so great, the beating of his heart reverberated through his entire body. This would probably be the most fun he'd had in quite some time.

As he reached the cabin, the door opened and a bloodied man appeared. It was his scout. The man's right hand was pressed to the nape of his neck. The vermilion hue spilling from between the scout's fingers ignited the darkness in the leader's eyes and soul. The scout noticed him there. He'd ask for help—but no, the scout whirled around instead. Was he trying to get away from his own boss?

"Seth," the leader called out softly.

The scout's movements seemed to creak to a halt.

"Where are you going? Come here."

“Ye—yessir,” the scout said, turning around. Gore continued to stream between his fingers. He looked as if he’d been soaking in a bathtub full of blood.

“Were Gass and Muradashi killed?”

“Yessir,” the scout replied, but he seemed to ask, *How did you know that? And why are you so calm about it?*

“And the one who did it—was it someone like me?”

“. . . Yessir.”

“How many are there?”

“Two . . . A married couple.”

“Both like me?”

“. . . Yessir.”

“Good work. Now you can rest.”

“Wha . . .” the scout said, gazing stupidly at an object that had been thrust in his face.

There was a small black circle—not an inch across. The incendiary round it fired shot through the scout’s throat and into his body, breaking apart as it struck his spine, at which point the brezene incendiary compound within it sparked to life. Six-thousand-degree flames welled up. The expansive force of the fire surpassed the limits of the scout’s body, and in a heartbeat he popped like a balloon.

The flames also assailed the horse, clinging to its armored plates. Though the steed tried to back away, its rider wouldn’t let it.

“Hang in there. I’ll stand it, and so will you.”

He gazed down at the flames creeping up his boots. The heat-, flame-, and water-resistant artificial leather slowly burned away, and the six-thousand-degree heat reached his flesh.

“Could a genuine Noble stand this? Or would they die, driven mad by the heat, then rise again? They’re such fucking masochists.”

The leader got down off his horse. The animal bolted away, as if that were exactly what it’d been waiting for. It was trying to put out the flames that enveloped its legs.

As he headed for the door, the man used his left hand to draw another weapon—a twenty-three-millimeter automatic handgun tucked through his belt. The flames had begun to spread to the wall of the cabin.

The second he stepped inside, he was greeted by a terrible, foul odor. As it entered his nostrils and coursed through his body, it was so overpowering that he came to a halt and even felt a bit dizzy. It was a sickeningly sweet smell. Abhorrently pure.

“I smell blood,” he declared.

But two fifty-millimeter shotgun shells had been waiting to empty their contents into the right half of his chest.

The close range and angle of the shot kept him from being knocked over. In fact, the blast went clean through him.

"What's this?" he asked, the danger of the situation finally shaking him from his sweet intoxication. His left hand probed the crater in his chest. "It's plain gone," he muttered, looking forward again.

The man holding the double-barreled shotgun looked like an ordinary farmer.

Pain began screaming through the leader's body. To escape it, he turned.

The green shirt the farmer wore was damp and black.

"That's my men's blood, isn't it?" the leader managed to say. He hated the way the pain made his voice quaver.

Saying nothing, the farmer cracked open his shotgun and removed the enormous shells. White wisps of smoke still rose from them.

"That's not like what you'd use on a human, is it?" the leader said, pointing feebly.

The farmer took two fresh fifty-millimeter shells out of his chest pocket and loaded them into his weapon. There was the sound of the gun clicking shut again.

"What the hell are you?" the farmer asked.

"I'm the same as you."

The farmer could be heard grinding his teeth. Shooting a glance over to the window and his wife, who looked to be about the same age he was, he quickly looked back, saying, "I thought the two of us could live in peace out in a place like this, fake Nobility or not. Truth is, that's just what we'd been doing for the last decade. But then you show up . . ."

Gunfire rang out.

BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM!

As the leader emptied his handgun wildly, it delivered a comfortable kick to his hand that was more than a human being could've handled, and the top half of the farmer's head was blown away. The outlaw's wrist was about to break. The bones creaked. It felt good. Really good. Ricocheting off the back wall, bullets shattered commemorative plates that hung on the walls. The glass was blown out of the window, and gigantic holes opened in the wife's chest and abdomen.

"Listen to the song of death. This is its melody. It's comforting. So comforting! Won't you die listening to it? Please, die now."

Suddenly, there was silence. The slide on the handgun remained back. He didn't bother to put in a fresh clip. Half of the blown-away portion of his chest hadn't regenerated yet. Having been knocked back against the wall, the farmer and his wife were trying to rise again. Their wounds were starting to close. Their injuries were different than his. The rate at which pseudo vampires recovered varied based on the physiology of the individual.

“Just as I thought—you two aren’t going to die after all,” the leader said, his tone choked with sadness. “You can’t die, can you? You can’t. Well, doesn’t that just make you sad? Doesn’t it?”

“We gave up on sadness a long time ago,” said the farmer’s wife. “And we lived here in peace. We thought we’d do so for the rest of our days. You ruined everything. Your friends will be along shortly, I’m sure. We’re going to kill them all. But before we do, we’re going to make you pay.”

“Luna!” the farmer cried out. “Stop it. I’ll kill him now. Don’t get a whiff of the scent of blood. Control yourself. Go on outside!”

“It’s no use. It was always going to be like this. I knew it from the very time you suggested we live out here—so I’m just not going to fight it anymore!”

His wife’s mouth opened as if this were something that’d been a long time coming. Her lips and mouth were both the hue of blood. But it was the white of her fangs that was truly eye catching.

Running over, his wife pounced. She was like a she-wolf. As she bit down on the man’s throat, the two of them began to shake.

“Luna!”

Her husband’s voice meant nothing to her. There was no sadness in it, no anger, no despair, no futility—for despair wouldn’t kill her.

Gurgling, she continued to suck down the man’s blood. The expression on her face was one of supreme bliss. She seemed to want this to go on forever.

Unexpectedly, she lurched back. Two vermilion streams connected the wife’s lips to the man’s neck. The farmer could make out the steely black shape that’d poked out of his wife’s back. For some reason, he wasn’t surprised. What the farmer felt was a mysterious peace.

Sputtering nonsensically, his wife grabbed the blade in her chest. Her body still fought for life. As she grabbed it and pulled, her fingers dropped off one by one. Like a doll whose mainspring had snapped, the woman’s body gave two great shudders, and then moved no more.

Keeping his foot pressed against her belly, the leader pulled his longsword out of her. Her head flew all the way to the farmer’s feet. She’d already begun to decay.

“I really must thank you,” the farmer said, waving farewell to his wife. “Would you be so kind as to kill me, too?”

“With pleasure,” the leader replied, his left hand pressed against his neck. He’d dropped his gun on the floor.

“I wanted to die. I’ve wanted it the whole time we’ve been out here. Morning and night, I’ve pictured nothing but my own death. And yet, I didn’t have the courage to do it myself.”

“I feel the same,” the leader said, sympathizing with the farmer from the bottom of his heart.

“I thought maybe some traveler who stopped by our place could do

it, but none of them were up to the task. Instead, we actually ended up killing visitors who came out here to steal our money. So, tell me something: where do you find death?"

The shotgun barked. The buckshot traveled out into the wilderness through the open door, while the farmer looked up above him. And there the outlaw was. For a moment, he appeared to stop in midair, but then he drifted back to earth without a sound.

Bright blood gushed from the farmer's body, making a sound like rain beating against the roof as it drew a crimson X on his form. It was unclear when the leader had unsheathed them, but the swords he held in either hand had cut the farmer from above one shoulder down to the opposite hip, forming that X.

Once the farmer had fallen, a bloody mist still whirled for a while before the outlaw's eyes. Perhaps he'd only dreamed most of this.

"He's dead," the leader said with a strange sort of acceptance. He got the feeling something he'd long forgotten had come back to him. "Will that happen to me, too? I have to wonder. But who in the world could do the same to me? If there were such a man, I'd probably fight him out of fear for my life. When will I meet someone like that?"

Returning his two swords to his back, he looked around the room. If there was nothing of value, they'd take food. That was his henchmen's job. But the corpses of two of his men lay on the floor.

As he was heading for the door, he suddenly halted. Something still seemed to bother him. With a heavy gait, he trudged into the kitchen. A large refrigerator caught his eye. There was a lock on it.

"A safe? No, I don't think so."

Grabbing the lock, he tore it off the door. The lock had been made to stop human beings.

The iron door opened. A stark chill struck his face. One look was enough to survey the refrigerator's contents. Seeing them, he waited a moment before giving a nod, and then he began to laugh. It was like the laughter of a man having a fit of insanity. Tears even streamed from his eyes.

"They tried to fight it, my ass! What was that about them resisting? All that talk about wanting to die but not being able to kill themselves! No, these two never had any intention of dying."

He slammed the refrigerator door so hard that the whole house shook. Then he went back into the living room. His swords felt unbearably sweet as he drew them from their scabbards. They felt equally good as he whacked them into the corpses of the farmer and his wife. He continued to do so for what seemed an eternity. And all the while, he never stopped shouting. "What about *me*? Am I just like you? Do I really want to stay the way I am now? Could it be I don't really want to die? Well, what is it?"

He continued relentlessly hacking up the already-decaying remains. In this hell, with no one there to see or hear him, he showed his true self.

Before the sun went down, the man who'd gone out on a scouting mission came back. He wasn't one of the villagers, but rather a drifter who'd been hired for the job. Twenty people had signed on for fifty dalas a day. Most of them had come to town looking for such work after hearing rumors that a band of outlaws was on its way. This was happening all over the Frontier, but both the mayor and Rust were surprised the vagrants had arrived so quickly. After all, the mayor hadn't believed the Black Death gang would arrive for quite a while. But the information possessed by the expert fighting men who wandered the Frontier was more accurate than anyone else's. Of course, they'd be risking their lives, but those who came to offer their services were professionals, and few of them would be inclined to run off during the fighting. The village was still careful about whom they hired, and naturally, payment was made in advance. However, the history of the Frontier was rife with tales of people who'd collected their pay, only to promptly turn tail. Therefore the villagers didn't wholly trust them, and they would keep an eye on the hired guns until the very end.

At least the man's report on his reconnaissance mission was accurate enough.

"Thirty miles to our south, eh? That'd put them here inside of three days."

Rust immediately set to organizing efforts to repel the attackers. The village's defenses were checked and reinforced, and armaments that'd been waiting in warehouses were set up in previously designated strategic positions. The weapons they had amassed were ones that had been purchased from the Capital through arms dealers in the five decades since the village was incorporated. Not only did they have the very latest-model intelligent mortar, but they also had quite a few old-fashioned fuse-style cannons.

The villagers needed no further training than their daily life. In a manner of speaking, every day on the Frontier was a day spent in combat. From the time they were toddlers, children practiced with swords and spears, and past the age of ten they had to master the use of firearms. Even if they weren't professionals, the men and women of the Frontier were born warriors. The drifters who'd temporarily taken on employment—mercenaries, in a manner of speaking—knew this quite well and didn't look down on the villagers, except for one amateur, fresh out of the Capital, who saw the townspeople practicing with their firearms and snickered.

Lyra was putting them through their paces. On hearing the laughter, she asked, "Care to try your luck against them, then?" She was wearing

a thin smirk.

The matter was settled most emphatically. While the drifter out of the Capital could barely hit the bull's-eye on a life-sized iron target at two hundred yards using the very latest-model clip-fed rifle, the people he'd mocked could easily hit the same at twice that distance using antiquated bolt-action weapons.

Outraged, the drifter challenged a villager to a sword fight, one on one. The villager chose to go with a stick he was comfortable with. It was over in an instant. Jumping back out of range of the drifter's sword, the villager delivered a blow with his footlong baton. It slammed into the drifter's face, knocking him out on the spot.

Lyra treated these villagers as if they were children. If they held back against her because she was a woman, she had no qualms about knocking them senseless. Even when they gave it their all, every swing met only air, and when they were finally exhausted, she delivered the coup de grâce. In that instant, the fact that this beautiful woman was a professional combatant was pounded into them.

Lyra had put down fifty of them and wasn't even breathing hard when a young man stepped forward. She occasionally taught swordsmanship and martial arts. When she did, she always saw him there. "What can I do for you, Pete?" she asked.

The young man mumbled something in reply.

"What?"

Perhaps catching the irritation in Lyra's voice, the young man hastily pulled a small package out of his pocket and pushed it into her hand. Before Lyra could open her mouth, he said, "I didn't know when it was —your birthday, that is." His voice rose so high it cracked. This was probably the first time he'd ever given anything to a member of the opposite sex. The boy—Pete—was sixteen years old.

Gazing long and hard at the boy and his flushing cheeks, Lyra said, "Well, I'm not giving it back now."

"Really? Great! See you!" And then the boy ran off. A short time later, whoops of joy could be heard behind a distant bower.

D showed up, too. If he were human, he'd have been wheezing and panting, but his now-pale complexion only lent his handsome features more intensity, making even the jaded mercenaries freeze in their tracks. Later, a particularly rough customer named Gil said, "Man, the enemy could just kill me now, and I wouldn't give a damn!"

In one sense, no one could've been less suited to lead than D. Even looking at him from afar, men and women, young and old, just seemed to melt. When he got closer, young ladies, and those who were far from young, either grew dreamy or fainted. This being the case, he could've relied on his voice alone, but even that brought nothing but remarks about how refined and pleasing and utterly irresistible it was. Finally, Lyra was forced to tell the Hunter, "For the love of God, would you just

get out of here?"

Saying nothing, D was just about to turn around when his left hand shot out.

"What do you think you're *doing*?" Lyra cried, one hand pressed to her rear and the other ready to slap him—but she stopped herself. It wouldn't do to look at D's face. "You've got strange tastes, don't you?" she remarked, and then she saw that everyone else was looking. "The next time you do that, I'll kill you." But her threat lacked conviction.

"Sorry about that," D apologized in a gruff voice. "But you're really my type, and—gaaaaaah!

"Sorry," D said, this time apologizing in his own voice, his left hand clenched tightly as he walked away.

However, a short time later, a hoarse voice from nowhere in particular groused in a sarcastic tone, "Just goes to show you, they're all a bunch of lazy bums."

III

That night, once Rust and Lyra had left the sheriff's office and D had returned to his room, there was a knock at the office door.

"Who is it?"

"Gil. Josh and Palau are with me," replied a voice so loud and discordant it could've sent women and children into convulsions.

"What do you want?"

"Well, I was wondering if you'd like to have a drink."

"Sounds pretty suspicious," the hoarse voice whispered. "Send 'em on their way. There's no telling what they've got planned. They're drifters who work for a price, after all."

"So am I," D said, and when he opened the door, it was hard to tell if it wasn't just to spite the hoarse voice.

The three enormous men were like a wall, but they did indeed have a bottle of whiskey with them. D led them back to his room.

Gil, who looked to weigh about four hundred fifty pounds, asked, "What's wrong with using the office?"

"That's for work."

"Okay, I get you," the man agreed readily enough.

Palau, who had a black patch over his right eye, surveyed the room before remarking, "Looks like we don't have enough chairs."

Though there was a sofa and armchairs, they were built for normal-sized people, and a sofa intended to seat two would be filled by Gil alone. Only D could sit in the armchairs.

"This will be fine," D said, sitting cross-legged on the floor.

"Wow," said Josh, a ridiculously large, recoilless antitank rifle slung across his back and an expression of surprise on his face as he followed suit. "Now here's a deputy who knows how to act."

“First, a drink,” Gil said, taking the cup that hung from his combat vest and setting it down in front of D, then filling it with an amber-colored liquid. An eye-popping stench filled the room. It definitely wasn’t the smell of alcohol. “This whiskey’s got a wild cobra head in it. Pretty cool, eh?” Though his tone was amiable, his eyes weren’t laughing.

Starting with a drink—it was something of an anachronism, but a good way to size somebody up.

Without a word, D took the cup and drained it in one gulp.

“You might . . .” Josh began to say. From the way he started to reach out to stop the Hunter, it was apparent he was the most conscientious of the three, but he was too late.

Whiskey with a wild cobra head in it was used to anesthetize monsters and supernatural creatures in the five-ton-and-over class—things like armored serpents or temblor rhinos. It was more of a drug than a drink, and almost more of a poison than a drug, and even the most seasoned alcoholic would be knocked on his ass with the first sip. Together, the three of these guys might be able to drain the cup in two or three minutes. Palau’s face seemed to say, *This clown doesn’t have any idea what he’s doing!*

Saying nothing, D set down the empty cup. There was no sign of the kind of reaction the trio expected. The Hunter’s complexion didn’t change a bit. He wasn’t even breathing hard.

After exchanging glances, it was Josh that spoke for them, asking, “How was it?” He looked apprehensive.

“That’s no way to handle this,” Gil said, casually taking hold of the grip of an enormous revolver, while the other two reached for blades tucked through their belts. Though Josh’s was just an oversized knife, Palau’s was a machete that could lop the head off a steer.

Sometimes this whiskey gave people nightmarish hallucinations. Apparently pursued by unimaginable visions, they would scream “No!” and “Help!” as they waved around a sword or fired wildly with a gun. It was utter madness. The men thought this was a precursor to such an incident.

D pushed the cup in front of Gil. “Aren’t you going to have a drink?”

Over forty years old, with a stubbly beard on his red face, the man grinned and said, “You’re damned straight I am!” Grabbing the bottle, he filled the cup to the brim.

“Hey!” Josh called out anxiously, and this seemed to be Gil’s signal to drain the cup. As soon as he did, his body lifted a foot off the floor, as if the ground had tossed him up. It was the result of his muscles gone mad. There was a loud thud. It was the sound of Gil’s heart beating. In midair, his massive form doubled over at the waist. Then he fell. There was another thud. His face was crimson, but it wasn’t flushed from the alcohol coursing through his blood. He was bleeding. Blood gushed from

every pore in his face.

"Hey!"

"*Gil?*"

The other two grabbed hold of his shoulders.

"Shut your yaps," the bloodied mercenary replied.

"Are you okay?"

"See if you can say, 'Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.'"

He told his boisterous colleagues, "Shut up, or else!" Suddenly, he pulled a pair of automatic handguns from the plastic shoulder holsters under either arm and waved them at the other two. Taking his eyes off his now-silenced friends, he asked the Hunter, "How was that?"

"I'd call it a draw," said D.

"All right. Now we can get down to brass tacks!" Gil said, cup still in hand. "The truth is, during the day I came and proposed this to the good sheriff, and he kicked my ass right out, but . . ." Gil went on to suggest that they go out and take on the Black Death gang. "All the preparations to fight them off have been made here already. But it seems a waste to just twiddle our thumbs waiting for them to get here. Let's take the fight to them, instead of just fighting them off. What do you think?"

"They've got, at most, sixty men," one of the others chimed in. "There's a pseudo Noble in the mix, but for the regular ones, the three of us could kill half of 'em if we had you on our side. It won't take long at all. Hit 'em while they're sleeping, take out as many as we can, then fall back. We're talking a surgical strike here. They'd never expect us to come out and hit 'em while they're still thirty miles out. It can't fail!"

Three pairs of eyes bored into D. They weren't thinking about the village. There was only one thing running through all three heads—winning in battle. And in that regard, they were true professionals.

"When do we go?"

D's reply brought cheers from his visitors. The gorgeous dhampir was an integral part of their plan.

"Tonight, right away," Gil replied, licking his chops. "Our cyborg horse could do the thirty miles each way in about two hours. Add in another hour for the wet work, and we'll be back here in three hours, having ourselves another drink. We're all set to go. As soon as you're ready, meet us out at the north gate."

The sound of a cyborg horse's hooves grew louder and closer. It was by the north gate. The three large figures standing beside their horses turned in that direction.

"Did he come?"

"Yeah, it's D."

"Must be nice to see so well at night," one of them growled in a low tone. If that tone were used in normal conversation, it would've seemed like he was spoiling for a fight.

Tonight was their turn guarding the gate. In another thirty minutes the next shift would arrive. It was for that reason they'd chosen to go out through the main gate instead of just sneaking out through the back gate to the south.

The hoof beats stopped. A handsome visage appeared, like another moon in the darkness.

"Okay, let's move out!" Gil said, reaching up for the pommel of his saddle.

"Hold it," said a voice, but it wasn't D's. It came from behind a flower-covered trellis to one side of the gates. Two new figures now stood before the trio.

"D, you dirty—"

"Sorry, boys, but he's working for me," Sheriff Rust said, scratching at the back of his head. After hearing about Gil's plan, he'd set out on foot to head them off.

"You stinkin' traitor!" Josh shouted.

"Simmer down," Lyra told him.

D was on the back of his horse, completely unfazed, not moving a muscle, his face devoid of emotion. He seemed like a gorgeous god of fate in heaven above, coldly staring down at arguing dolts.

"Stop all this foolishness," Rust said. "Right now, every fighting man we can get is worth more than all the Nobles' gems. I can't have you three getting yourselves killed. No 'surgical strikes.'"

"You told him all about that, you bastard!" Gil said, his entire face swollen and vermilion.

"I'm working for him," D said in his own voice.

The three mercenaries groaned, the sound of a curse that couldn't be put into words.

"Swear to me you won't try anything like this on your own again. If not, you'll all be dismissed without pay," Rust told them dispassionately.

"Hey, we were just—" Gil began to protest futilely.

"Do you swear it, or don't you?"

The matter was settled quickly enough.

"Okay," Gil said, shrugging his shoulders. There was nothing a mercenary feared more than missing a payday. It was stipulated in their contract that payment could be stopped at any point if they didn't follow the sheriff's orders. "There was nothing in our agreement about any fines."

"Good thing, eh?" said Rust.

Giving Lyra a wink, Gil said, "Be seeing you, sweetheart." Raising one arm, he got up on his horse.

All three of the men started to ride back toward town.

"Hold up," Rust called to them.

Halting his steed, Palau twisted around with a look on his face that

asked, *What is it now?*

"Where do you think you're going?" asked the sheriff.

"Where? Back into town, I guess. Later on, we're gonna pound that freaking Hunter into a pulp."

"If you wanna pound someone into a pulp, do it out there," Rust said, pointing toward the gates.

"What?"

"As sheriff, I'd like to propose a certain plan. Basically, it's a lightning strike at the Black Death gang's camp thirty miles south of here to deal some damage to their equipment and personnel."

Gil and Josh turned and gaped in amazement. Palau's jaw dropped.

"Our cyborg horses could make the trip there and back in less than two hours. Figuring in the time for the actual assault, we could be back in the village drinking wild cobra whiskey in three hours."

Baring his teeth, Gil started to say, "Hey, that's what I—" Apparently he couldn't help himself.

"Yeah, D told me. I was surprised how close our ideas were," the sheriff said smugly.

"Hold on, there—that was *my* idea!"

"In that case, you shouldn't have any complaints about it."

"What's the problem, then?" Gil shouted. Though he was desperately trying to restrain himself, he started cracking his knuckles. It was his instinctive way of demonstrating his resolve. At his enormous size, he definitely got the point across.

"The problem's whether it can actually be done or not," Rust replied flatly. "I think it can."

"You're damned straight it can. The one and only Gil Mandalay came up with that idea!"

"I'm surprised we both came up with exactly the same thing—so, should we give it a shot?"

Josh and Palau's expressions changed.

Grinning, Rust said, "Then you'll have to try out my idea. Too bad I won't be there to see it happen, though."

Gil was still spoiling for a fight, his lips pursed, but the other two men became rather amiable.

"You mean we can go ahead?" asked Josh.

"Yes, you guys and D. I couldn't have picked anyone better for the job."

"You didn't come up with that plan at all, did you?" Gil barked, jabbing a finger as thick as a baby's arm at the end of Rust's nose.

"It doesn't matter who came up with it. This is how it's going to be. Get yourselves back here tonight. That's an order."

"You dirty—"

If Lyra hadn't stepped between them, Gil probably would've lunged at the lawman.

Seeing how he grit his teeth and restrained himself, a hoarse voice jeered, “My, aren’t you the feminist.”

“I don’t wanna hear any funny voices outta you, you damned traitor! Okay, Sheriff, we’re gonna go out there and stir things up. But the leader’s gotta be—”

“Me,” D said, naturally.

DEATHS HAND IN HAND

CHAPTER 4

I

A thousand yards shy of their target, the four men dismounted. They'd heard the Black Death had scouts with keen hearing and the ability to see well in the dark. From experience, they knew they couldn't go any closer without being detected. Though it was D who ordered them to dismount, no one voiced any complaints.

A light danced in the distant darkness, most likely a fire at the outlaws' encampment.

"The enemy probably has scouts out," Palau said as he looked all around. The hair that covered half his face glowed with the strange green light from his electronic eye.

"We're counting on that peeper of yours. Come through for us, big guy," Gil said, giving him a slap on the back. Since they were both huge, the other man didn't even budge, though someone D's size might've been sent flying.

"Well, I can see a structure. A farmhouse?" Palau ventured.

"That wasn't on the map," said Josh, cocking his head to one side.

"Let's move."

With this signal from D, they started off on foot, leading their horses behind them. After they'd advanced about five hundred yards, they saw a couple of riders to their right who were apparently on watch, but the four men slipped by them without the outlaws noticing, reaching a spot where they could make out the rest of the hostiles around the campfire.

"We've gotta find where the enemy's got their weapons stashed," Gil said, lowering his electronic binoculars and turning to Palau.

"Leave it to me."

Taking off his backpack, Palau pulled a remote control and an odd-looking bundle out of it. When the remote was switched on, the bundle immediately transformed into an airplane with a three-foot wingspan. He apparently carried it around all folded up.

"I bought this little reconnaissance plane off a traveling arms merchant," Palau said with delight as he fitted a hemispherical piece containing a lens—apparently a camera of some sort—into the metallic frame of the plane. "All set. Now, whatever this baby sees will go right into my eye. Stand back, guys."

He worked the levers on the remote with one hand, and the plane glided off into the darkness without a sound.

"How's it going?" Gil asked anxiously.

"At fifteen hundred feet, zooming in—okay," Palau said with a nod. It seemed the camera had begun broadcasting the scenery below to his eye. "They've got some serious armament. One triple-shot missile

launcher, an old-fashioned, fifty-ton intelligent tank like they used back in the Nobility Wars, and a ten-shot, fifty-millimeter laser cannon. Plus three heavy machine guns, ten light ones, a shitload of automatic rifles __"

Gil's look became one of delight as he said, "Then no village could hold them off, no matter how tight their defenses. We'll take 'em out starting with the biggest guns first, Captain, just as planned."

"Just as planned," D said, his eyes still on the fire and figures ahead. "What about guards?"

"One each on the four points of the compass. They've got short-range radar, too. Effective at maybe fifty yards? No surprise here, but the missiles, tank, and laser cannon each seem to have about five guys posted on 'em round the clock."

"In other words, it's gonna be tricky trying to get in without being noticed," Gil said, tilting his head to one side. "Got any suggestions, Captain?"

"I could lay into them with this. One blast, and it'd be complete havoc. What do you say to running in, then?" Josh asked, slapping the antitank rifle on his back.

But Gil ignored him, gazing at D with searching eyes. He wasn't so much judging D's strength as he was simply trying to be disagreeable.

"We'll use a diversion," D said quietly. His voice was like steel reciting poetry in the depths of a dark and moonless night.

The Hunter reached with his left hand towards Palau's face. The light from the man's electronic eye was hidden as the palm of D's hand covered it.

Josh reached for his knife.

Quickly pulling his hand away again, the Hunter said, "They've got a makeshift ammo dump set up behind that farmhouse. I'll take that out."

Gil inquired incredulously, "How do you know that? What's the story, Palau?"

But the scout with the electronic eye nodded. "Pretty boy's right. How'd you access what was in my eye?"

"Synchronize watches," D told them. "I'll take out the ammo dump exactly four minutes from now. As soon as it blows, we'll get the missiles, tank, and lasers, in that order. You're on the tank and lasers. I'll handle the missiles."

"You don't seriously intend to haul them out of here, do you?" Gil asked, the intrigue plain on his face. "Because if you're not careful blowing them up, not only will those guys get blown to pieces, but we will too! What are you thinking?"

D turned around and looked at the roughneck. Their eyes met. Though it was a pitch-black night, the Hunter's dark eyes seemed to glow. Gil suddenly felt as if they were going to swallow him. Before he could fight it, he was falling into the depths of the darkness. Something

came into view—and the instant he realized what it was, he cried out.

It'd been a dream. He trembled as his two comrades in arms stood watching him. A black-gloved hand was covering his mouth. The darkness remained still.

"Did you see?" D asked. His voice fell from high above. Gil didn't bother looking up. For all eternity, he wouldn't know what the Hunter was asking. But someone had loomed before him, oh, so black and oh, so high, challenging the heavens.

Gil mumbled something.

The black-gloved hand came away from his mouth.

"Not a thing," Gil repeated. "I didn't see . . . anything . . ."

As if nothing had happened, D said, "You have four and a half minutes to get it done. We'll meet back here in five minutes." The figure in black spun around, but none of the other three noticed that his left hand was missing from the wrist down.

The house was filled with the stench of blood. It had seeped into the very cores of the roof beams, the logs of the walls, and the floorboards, rotting them, and even if the house were razed, the area would retain a cloying smell that would keep any living creatures from drawing closer. Until this evening, it hadn't been that way. The former residents had been very good about getting rid of the smell, which posed the greatest threat to their self-control. But at present, the floor was covered with blood-red plastic. Bags of plasma for medical procedures, each containing 100 cc, were spread across the floor. However, that wasn't the source of the stench.

The fluid of over a hundred of those bags had been emptied into his body, and the blood now clung to his flesh and bones and organs. When he opened his eyes, it began to slosh, and when he got up out of bed, it eddied wildly in him.

"He's coming," the leader said, barely able to squeeze those two words from a body that felt as dirty and heavy as mud. "He's coming. Yes, here he comes!"

A sword gleamed in either hand.

"Oh, come! Please, come to me! You're the one who can kill me. Zeke, Bayon, Kronos—are you all set? Are you ready to sing the songs of death? Better think of some words to beg for your lives. This time, we'll be up against a formidable foe!" He bellowed like a wild beast, whipped up by a dark desire even he couldn't fully comprehend.

A black glint zipped to the wall. Striking the logs, it laid waste to the caulking between the thick trunks and shot through. After zipping along the ground for another twenty yards, it stabbed into something, and the instant it did, a low groan came from beneath it as something crept along, black and spiderlike. The ammo dump shielded by vinyl and reinforced plastic lay just ahead of those five painfully struggling "legs."

The missiles were mounted on a steel truck. The five men didn't move a muscle as they scanned their surroundings. It was easy enough to approach them. D's feet didn't make a sound, and his body melded with the darkness. On a night when even the stars weren't out, he could stand right in front of a person without them even knowing it. Avoiding the watch fire, the Hunter glided toward the man guarding the rear of the truck. His gait wavered unexpectedly as vertigo suddenly assailed him. The bats' venom hadn't left him yet. Dropping down on one knee, he put an arm out to brace his upper body as it doubled over, but his hand was missing.

These sounds didn't escape the guard. "Who goes there?" he shouted as loudly as he could, turning the flashlight he wore on his hip in their direction.

Even though he lay in the beam of light, D didn't respond immediately. This time the venom was having a particularly strong effect on him.

In response to the man's shout, the other guards came running with their firearms or longswords drawn. The air of malevolence that enveloped them was channeled through the looks they gave D, but it vanished with shocking ease. Merciless and malevolent faces acquired embarrassingly stupid expressions of rapture, for they had looked at D's face.

This strangely amicable state between friend and foe existed for exactly one second. It was D that shattered it. To the men, it probably looked as if the gorgeous intruder had spread black wings and taken off. His talons were a blade crueler than any they'd ever known.

The tank in particular had a great many watch fires around it. The computer within it could navigate the vehicle, pinpoint enemies, and launch attacks that would destroy the defensive walls around a village. Its 150-millimeter cannon could reduce to dust anyone who resisted, while the four machine guns would turn them into hamburger. Three and a half inches of high-polymer armor were capable of deflecting any and all attacks by the enemy, making this tank essentially invincible out on the Frontier.

"He's late. What do we do?" Josh asked Palau in the depths of the darkness about thirty feet away, having crawled over to the other man like an insect.

"Damned if I know. We're running outta time. Do we do this, or what?" Palau said. Quickly he got to his feet, holding a small automatic pistol in either hand. Each had a silencer resembling a sausage on the end of it. "Cover me."

He dashed away.

He came into the light of the fire. Spotting him, two of the guards raised their rifles. There were two faint *phuuuut!* sounds, like whispers from the spirit world. Shot right between the eyes, the guards flew backward.

Palau swiftly circled around behind the tank. The remaining three guards jumped out.

"What the hell?"

Two of them were wearing bulletproof helmets, masks, and body armor. Reconnaissance from the air hadn't shown their gear.

"Seriously, what the *hell*?"

Phuuuut! Phuuuut! Phuuuut! Phuuuut! Phuuuut!

Spent casings of gold flew through the air, and one of the men fell after being hit ten times. One of the men in body armor was shot through the neck. The other one managed to deflect all the bullets as he brought his rifle to bear.

A report that was nothing like that of a handgun split the night air. The element of surprise was lost. The whole encampment awoke at once.

"Damn it—die when I shoot you!" Palau cursed as the massive round from the rifle scored a hit on his solar plexus. It left an entry wound the size of a grown man's head. But flesh rolled into the wound like mud, filling it up again. Two more slugs hit him in the chest. And the same thing happened with both of them.

"Truth be known, I was born for shootouts—see, I've got this regenerative ability."

Taking aim at the throat of the dumbfounded guard, he fired off ten shots, two of which found their mark.

Bending back like a longbow, the man fell. From behind him came shouts.

"We're under attack!"

"It's over by the tank!"

"Don't let 'em get away!"

The voices and footfalls barreled closer.

Clucking his tongue in disgust as he changed direction, Palau fired indiscriminately. After two or three shots, the slide remained back.

"Oops, out of ammo. Some pro I am!"

As he stood bolt upright, something howled past his chest. Twenty yards away, flames exploded among the figures headed toward him.

"Consider yourself covered!" Josh called out in the distance.

"Took your sweet time about it!" Palau spat as he raced over to the tank, took an explosive charge and timer from his belt, and pushed them into the tank treads.

There was a mechanical whir.

"What the hell?"

The turret of the tank was turning.

"Don't tell me it's gonna fire that thing," Palau said as the barrel of the gun swung over his head. He let out a sigh of relief, then cried out.

Right in front of his face was the smaller muzzle of the machine gun mounted beside the tank's main gun.

A roaring sound and flames made Gil turn and look.

"That's Josh's antitank rifle. That idiot!"

It was time to prepare for a fight. Judging from the location of the explosion, the outlaws would probably figure the laser cannon was in danger too and come running.

"Took 'em long enough."

Crouching down, Gil ran. The bodies of guards lay all around the laser cannon he'd rigged with explosives. The men who came running to the scene wouldn't even have time to be surprised. In fact, they wouldn't have time to notice anything. There were two minutes until detonation.

Grunting, Gil halted. His enormous frame brimmed with tension and impatience.

A figure stood there.

Is that D? he thought. The height and build were both quite similar to D's. But it wasn't him. Even the Hunter's shadow was gorgeous. This guy was—

Time was too precious for him to give it any further consideration. Gil channeled his strength into his "gaze." It was something he'd been born with, and family members, teachers, and friends who'd been exposed to it had died. If he concentrated, he could knock insects out of the air, make a person's heart explode, or make plants wither with just a look. Fish would drown and bob to the surface. Classmates he didn't care for would fall, and policemen dropped dead. The next thing he knew, he was doing it for a living. It wasn't until several years later that he learned the nature of his power and how to control it—after taking nearly two hundred lives.

Clutching his chest, his foe toppled forward. That was the usual reaction, and Gil was satisfied. Quickly turning around, he was just about to leave. But a pained voice detained him.

"If you're going to hit me in the chest, you should at least do it with a stake."

The man rose from the ground, as strong as a mountain. He was in the midst of drawing the twin longswords that were crossed on his back. Clanging them together, the man charged forward.

Gil focused his gaze for all he was worth.

Just then, the ammo dump exploded. Josh's antitank rifle was no more than a bottle rocket in comparison. The shock wave and shrapnel instantly killed twenty of the outlaws, and all of the rest were injured. Flames leapt wildly, trying to consume the encampment, and all told

more than thirty of the men were charred to the bone.

The explosion could be heard and the flames seen from the village of Geneve.

"Looks like they pulled it off," Lyra whispered to the sheriff up at the top of the watchtower.

"It's even bigger than I expected. You think maybe those four didn't . . ." Rust said anxiously.

"I can't say about the other three, but D will probably be coming back," Lyra told him.

"I sure hope so."

"Want to send someone out to meet them?"

"No, I wouldn't want to risk them running into any scouts the enemy might have out. We need every last pro we've got here."

"That's the right call," Lyra said in a tone that suited her frosty nature, if not her lovely countenance. "Our responsibility lies right here in this village. What kind of Black Death spies do we have sneaking around? Who was it that killed one of their men? Maybe they're one and the same. Then again, maybe they're not. There's only one thing we *do* know—they're a poison pill that could wreck this village. That's what should concern you and me both."

"We've checked the village register. Only four people have moved into the village in the last decade: Codo Graham, Sergei Roskingpan, Stejiban Toic, and Miriam Sarai."

"With one exception, they all seem pretty upstanding."

"Check. All except Old Man Roskingpan, right?" Rust said, the wry grin that flitted across his lips betraying his partiality to the man he'd just named.

Through the window behind them, someone shouted, "Heeeeeeey!"

"Speak of the devil. It's the old man."

Scratching the back of his head, Rust walked over to the window and looked down. The wrinkled face of the man who stood at the entrance to the stairs in a straw hat and worn jacket was turned in the lawman's direction. Seeing that it was Rust, the old man raised the bottle of liquor in his right hand, saying, "Bless your hide for burning the midnight oil. Brought you a little something. I'll run it right up."

"No, that's okay. I'll come down for it," the lawman replied, not wanting the drunk to interfere with what they were doing.

For a second Old Man Roskingpan looked peeved, but apparently he got over it quickly enough, saying, "Okay, okay! I'll leave it right here, then. This here's the very finest champagne, which I happened to buy off a liquor vendor from Argo City. One swig of this and you won't be able to drink the swill they serve in this town anymore!" The old drunk punctuated the remark with a hiccup.

"Okay, I'm sold. I'll be right down!"

“No rest for the weary,” Rust heard Lyra remark snidely as he started down the five-story watchtower’s narrow staircase.

The old man wasn’t outside anymore. Where he’d stood, only the bottle of liquor remained. Picking it up, the sheriff saw that it was the kind of dirt-cheap champagne only the very worst of liquor sellers even bothered carrying.

“That lying old coot,” he said with a smirk, looking both ways down the street and finding cheerful humming flowing back from the darkness to his left.

Letting out a good-natured chuckle, Rust returned to the stairs. He casually glanced at the bottle. It’d struck him as odd at first that it was left open, but that had slipped his mind while he looked for the old man. Scanning the ground, he soon located the cap.

“Old man, I didn’t want your backwash.”

Though Rust had thought that might be the case, it still irked him a little.

As he reached down to pick up the cap, his fingertips brushed the ground. It was wet. Taking a pinch of dirt, he brought it up to his nose. It smelled like champagne. Really cheap stuff.

“Looks like he spilled some.”

Eyeing the bottle, he saw it was still about 70 percent full. Giving it no further thought, Rust headed back to the watchtower with the bottle in hand.

“That’s his big present?” Lyra said, a cynical look in her eyes.

“Yeah, the cheapest shit they make. You probably shouldn’t drink any of it.”

“I wouldn’t drink it either, if I were you.”

“Well, I’ll just have a sip.”

Lyra didn’t say another word as the sheriff put the bottle to his lips and took a big swallow. She knew better than anyone how much he liked to drink and how well he could hold his liquor.

A second later she realized he’d made a fatal error. Crying out as if something were stuck in his throat, Rust clutched his belly and doubled over.

III

The bottle broke when it fell to the floor. Though the lawman had only intended to have a mouthful, not a drop of its contents remained.

“Huuuuah!”

Rust vomited. But it wasn’t alcohol he brought up. A deep red mass of blood hit the floor, spreading wide.

“Rust!”

“Stay back!” the sheriff told her, sounding like he was about to suffocate. “This thing . . . just slid down into my belly all of a sudden—

oof! Oof!"

His fingers, which had been pressed to his solar plexus, dangled limply now. Beneath them, Lyra glimpsed a bloodied blade. It had begun slowly sawing in a line along his stomach. The flesh split open, and his fingers fell off completely. Blood poured from the lawman like a waterfall.

"Rust!"

"It's all right, Lyra. Don't let the bastard get away," he ordered her in a voice some would've called a death rattle.

"Roger that." Taking a step back, the warrior woman drew the sword from her hip.

Rust staggered, his body wracked with pain, but he didn't fall. He was gritting his teeth. Every one of his muscles tightened, and even his anus clenched. But it wasn't in an effort to overcome his pain.

"You'll never get away now," Lyra said in a steady tone, her remark directed toward the now-immobilized knife jabbing from the lawman's flesh. Her lovely countenance was as frightening as it was bewitching. "Identify yourself. Are you a spy for the Black Death?"

"This was a mistake," said a shadowy voice inside Rust's stomach. "Who could've known the sheriff was a pseudo Noble? There's the screwup of a lifetime. My name's Domon. Yeah, I snoop for the Black Death."

"But you have another name, don't you? Stejiban Toic."

"I knew a farmer by that name."

"You're ready for what's coming, aren't you?" Lyra said, drawing back her right arm. "Just one last thing—are you the only one they've got lurking in the village?"

"Oh, wouldn't you love to know!"

"Was it you that killed the guy with the bats? Or was it one of your friends?"

"No, it wasn't any of us. That would have to be someone else." The voice took on a malevolent ring as it continued, "Seems we're not the only danger you've got here in town. You'd better look around real good. The gang will be here in two days. Then, no matter who you've got living here, you'll all get sent to hell together. Okay, go ahead and stab away, if you must!"

"Thanks for the warning," Lyra said, a fierce gleam in her eye. Her right arm trembled with an electric urge to kill. However, she quickly lowered it.

"What are you doing, Lyra?" Rust asked, covered with blood and sweat.

Not replying, she pulled a silver cylinder about the size of a cigarette from the pouch on her left hip. She then rubbed the black end of it against her cape. From within it came a sound like gunpowder burning.

"This remedy's a little harsh, but hang in there."

"Okay," the sheriff replied.

They joined forces in an example of perfect teamwork. Showing no fear or doubt, Rust opened his mouth. Lyra shoved the cylinder into it. Rust swallowed it without biting down.

"What the hell do you think you're—" the voice cried out.

There was a scream of despair. Before it had ended, fire shot from Rust. Ten-thousand-degree flames from the incendiary device spewed from his mouth, nose, ears—even his belly. Blazing like a torch, the sheriff said nothing as he fell to his knees—but another scream flew from his abdomen, then quickly died again. As he thudded against the floor, a white fog blasted his body and the flames on it.

"We were dealing with a liquid person here. If I'd stabbed him, he just would've spilled out through the wound and gotten away. Which is why he asked me to stab him," Lyra said, her expression cold as she continued to spray out the contents of the small extinguisher, but her eyes were shaken by a hint of sadness.

Galloping on his cyborg horse, D pulled back on the reins about three-quarters of a mile away from the encampment. He was in the middle of the wilderness. After confirming that the tank and laser cannon had been destroyed, he'd gone to the rendezvous point. Gil and the others hadn't come back. And that wasn't all that hadn't returned; D's left hand was still missing. Without bothering to search for it, he headed toward the village. From the time they'd parted company, each of them had been responsible for their own fate. If the hand was still fine, it would come back. If it didn't come back—that was all there was to it.

But D hadn't halted his steed to confirm that the outlaw band behind him had been wiped out. He'd heard a cry of pain ring out in the darkness. It was the voice of his left hand.

D's eyes focused on an area where weeds as tall as a man's chest were swaying in the night breeze. From behind the tall grass a face came into view. The coat that covered a build closely resembling D's own came down to the heels of the man's boots. As the man trod through the grass toward the Hunter, D noticed that he had a longsword slung over his right shoulder. On the end of it was a human hand, stabbed through the palm.

"You forgot something," the man said. "The first time I speared it, it ripped itself open and got free. And thanks to that, we kissed our ammo dump goodbye." The man laughed in a low tone. There was no animosity, no sense of outrage, just innocent laughter. "But that doesn't really matter. I caught it again and kept it with me so that through it, I could sense where to find you. My name is Toma. I'm the leader of the Black Death gang."

"D."

Toma flinched at his own gasp of astonishment. “So, you’re D? I’ve always wanted to meet you. Come to think of it, we had to meet. Oh, this makes me so happy, D!”

Toma was truly enraptured. His eyes were bloodshot, and a little drool ran from his mouth. A chattering sound came from his fangs.

“So, you’re a pale imitation of a Noble, are you?” D said, his right hand going over his shoulder for the sheath of his sword.

“Oh, hold up, there. Get too hasty, and I’ll have to kill this hand of yours.”

“Do whatever you like.”

Toma’s eyes bulged. Here the outlaw had thought he was holding all the cards, but he’d been dealt an unexpected blow.

“Wait. Just hold on, now. You don’t have a problem with going the rest of your life without your left hand?”

Nothing from the Hunter.

Toma blinked his eyes. He seemed to be at a loss. “Then I guess there’s no point in me keeping it. You can have it back. But first, I’d like a little something in return. Like hearing about those missiles, for starters.”

D said nothing. Knowing the true nature of his foe, he normally would’ve attacked the man without any further discussion.

“I figured you’d blow them up or carry them off, not launch them. What’s more, you scored a direct hit on that big old glacier way off in the wilderness, and that took real skill. Our tank and laser cannon got taken out, too. Thanks to you, we won’t be able to steamroller the target on our next job. You think maybe the two of us could talk some business?”

“What happened to the other three?” D inquired. This was not a question he’d have asked ordinarily, but this time he was the group’s leader. Out of responsibility to his subordinates, he had to ask.

“I faced them. That’s all you need to know. And the next one I’ll face is you.”

“Give me the hand back first.”

“Sure—here you go!”

Wiggling the sword over his shoulder back and forth, Toma freed the left hand. His sword moved forward and back. There was a single, garbled cry. The left hand was brutally chopped in half in midair, with the halves landing in the grass to either side of D.

“I just get the feeling it wouldn’t be wise to have you putting that thing back on. Now, show me how good you are, Vampire Hunter D. Let me see with my own eyes and experience firsthand whether you’re able to kill me or not.”

Toma bit down on the fingers of his left hand. There was the sound of teeth coming together, and then another sound rang out. A crunching. He was chewing up his own fingers. He extended his hand. His thumb

alone remained, the other four fingers having been bitten off.

"Now we're the same. I want to do this fair and square. Okay, D? Why aren't you looking for your left hand? You don't even seem worried. Good! That's just the sort of man I've been waiting for," Toma said, saluting the Hunter with his bloodied hand.

When the outlaw dashed into action, D bounded.

"Yes!" one of them exclaimed.

One in the air, the other on the ground: as the two figures passed, the clash of their blades echoed and dazzling sparks flew. The pair faced off with more than twenty feet between them and once again raced forward like two winds, winds well suited to the desolate place they were in. Accursed winds. The black wind of unearthly beauty struck with his silvery fang, and the gale that blew against him raked with steely claws. Particles of light danced, and each time a faint light filled some corner of the pitch-black wasteland that was the plain. The winds blew against each other, around again, and collided once more. A cry of pain shot out in the darkness, and something heavy thudded against the ground.

"Aaaaaah! Why, D?"

Arching backward as if he were going to keel over, Toma shook. Deep red blood flew from all over his body. He pressed his right hand against the stump of his left arm.

"Why, D? Why didn't you kill me? Why'd you take off my arm and let me stab you through the heart?"

D staggered backward. Toma's blade jabbed through his chest at an angle.

What had happened was obvious. During their deadly battle, the residual effects of the venom and the sunlight syndrome had struck him.

"This is no good, D. No good at all. You were supposed to slay me. You were the Hunter who could do it. If you can't, I'll . . . I'll . . ." Bending back so far he faced the sky, Toma howled. "I'll become a Noble!"

D fell. Without looking, Toma reached over with his right hand and pulled the sword from D's heart.

"There's no one now. No one at all." A voice that sounded like a sob traveled through the brush. It conveyed nothing short of heartbreak. A short time earlier, while working to save the burning sheriff in the watchtower in Geneve, Lyra's expression had showed exactly the same emotion.

SLEEPER AGENT

CHAPTER 5

I

Just after daybreak, Old Man Roskingpan was questioned and a search was performed on the house belonging to Domon of the Black Death gang—also known as the farmer Stejiban Toic. The reason for the search of Toic's house was obvious enough; the old man was brought in because he was suspected of complicity with him. After all, Toic—a liquid human—had concealed himself in the bottle of champagne the old man brought.

"There's no way I could stuff a grown man into a champagne bottle in the first place!" the drunk protested, which sounded reasonable enough. However, liquid humans could make tens of thousands of their particles fuse into one while still retaining their fluid state. Everyone knew that.

The old man, of course, maintained that he didn't know anything about the incident. Though he could recall being in the saloon, having a few drinks, and overhearing that Rust and Lyra were in the watchtower, he said he didn't remember going out there or leaving the bottle behind. About five minutes had elapsed from the moment when the old man called out to Rust to when the sheriff reached the bottom of the tower. After setting down the bottle, the old man had left immediately, and if Toic had opened the bottle, poured out the contents, and concealed himself in it, there was a very good chance that he'd been tailing the old man. However, Toic hadn't been at the saloon, and the idea to go out to the tower—according to the old man's account—had come from hearing in the saloon that Rust and Lyra were there. The chances that Toic just happened to spot the old man and then follow him were extremely remote. It was quite conceivable that this had been planned in advance.

Rust was handling the questioning, which had bogged down on that last point, when Lyra returned from Domon/Toic's house.

"It seems Toic left his house last night, saying he was going to go have a drink. The time was—"

It was the same time Old Man Roskingpan was hanging around town; it wouldn't have been at all strange if Toic had encountered the man before he went to the saloon. Lyra's investigation had been thorough. On her way back from Toic's house, she'd stopped by the old man's place—which was less than two hundred yards from the farmer's—and learned that the old man had passed another villager before going to the saloon.

"When this guy asked him, 'Heading off to work now?' the old man replied, 'Yeah, I'm going off to give a little *encouragement* to the sheriff and his sweetheart,' and he waved the bottle at him."

Judging from the timing, it was possible that Toic might have been out spying when he was fortunate enough to overhear this exchange, only then formulating his plan to hide in the bottle. In other words, the old man had intended to give the bottle to Rust and Lyra from the very start.

"For the time being, we'll let him go," Rust decided. "The problem is, the possibility he was involved in the scheme remains. Have somebody keep an eye on him."

"That works for me."

Exhaling liquor-tinged breath and cursing the sheriff for a two-bit lawman, the old man was led out, and Rust moved on to his next problem.

Shortly before noon, he paid a visit to the mayor at the town hall. Two hours later, a mother and child were sent out through the main gates to the village. It was Toic's wife and his son, who'd just turned three. The mayor of a village had the ultimate right to decide what was done with the family of a villager who'd broken the law. Discussing this was the purpose of Rust's visit. The woman had met Toic four years earlier, when he first came to the village, and they'd had a child together. From that day until this, his wife had gone without knowing who or what he really was.

In Frontier villages, it wasn't rare for people to do what Toic had done. Therefore, communities made their own distinct sets of laws intended to root out such people. In the case of Geneve, there was a strict clause that stated: *Anyone married to someone from outside the village who has any reason to suspect their spouse of behavior unbecoming a villager, no matter how slight, should contact the sheriff.* Toic's wife was considered to have breached this rule. The mayor, the deputy mayor with his bandaged face, Rust, and Lyra were present as judgment was passed, but Toic's wife refused to accept their decision, protesting that she hadn't known anything.

"There's no way that a person capable of turning into a liquid wouldn't betray that with some sort of abnormal behavior. Even if the woman's denials are to be believed, having lived with him without noticing it makes her an accomplice, and her actions are still considered suspect."

That was the mayor's decision. Though the deputy mayor tried to suggest that perhaps he was being a bit too hard on her, it was his habit to find fault with every little thing the mayor did, and as always his objection was ignored. Their deliberation proceeded smoothly, and it was decided that they would *generously* allow the mother and her son to go to a neighboring village while it was still light out. Toward that end, her neighbors loaded all her furniture and possessions into a wagon.

As the woman wept and pleaded with them to at least let her child remain, she heard the sound of the gates closing behind her. But the two

of them remained. Though the mayor himself stood atop the gate, entreating her to hurry up and get going, the woman asserted that she wouldn't leave the village. Even with no one answering her, the woman never stopped crying out mournfully.

The villagers were in the middle of their combat training, and they threw themselves into it more than usual. During martial-arts practice, the villagers fought like mad, as if trying to ignore something, and fighting against them, the professional mercenaries couldn't help but get serious as well. One person after another got hurt, and it was decided to cancel practice while they still had some strength left for the actual fighting. The villagers guarding the gate, the farmers diligently tending their fields, the workers busy in the town hall, the mayor and the deputy mayor, and Rust and Lyra all heard the woman's voice. It was almost enough to shake their callous rules. However, not one of them suggested letting her back in. The woman from next door who'd nursed Toic's son when his mother was bedridden and who'd brought him to the doctor when he had a fever covered her ears, but even she didn't ask that they not be driven away. For these people knew from the day they were born what it meant to live on the Frontier.

The sun went down. Everyone expected that the mother and child would leave.

The cries beyond the gates became curses. Taking her son in her arms, the woman shouted, "Look at this boy! What has he done?" There were no tears in her eyes. She'd long since cried herself dry. Not understanding what was happening, her doleful-looking child began to cry.

All the men just inside the gates had to cover their ears and grit their teeth. Some even burst into tears.

The village and the world were about to fade into blue. Finally, she had to give up. Staying there any longer would just make them prey for monsters. Laying curses on the lot of them, the woman took up the reins of her wagon. Wheels creaking, they rolled into the darkness.

"Hurry!" someone muttered.

Even after the wagon had vanished from sight, the cries of the child still trailed along after it. But his whimpering stopped abruptly.

All the villagers knew in an instant what that meant. Several people ran to the gates, climbing up them, but even before they'd finished, a guard in the watchtower shouted, "It's Gil's guys!"

The emergency siren began to wail across the sky above the village.

Just prior to this, Rust had suddenly noticed he was alone in the sheriff's office. Villagers had been coming to ask about their stations in battle or how rations were going to be distributed, but since the mother and child had been exiled there'd been no sign of anyone. Rust wasn't to blame, and everyone knew it. So no one gave him a hard time about it. But aside from the mayor, the sheriff was the other face of authority. At

times like this, people always needed someone to be a sacrifice—the one they looked away from.

A figure in blue came in. It was Sheryl, carrying bread and a hunk of cheese.

"What's all this?" Rust asked her.

"Daddy—er, the mayor—told me to bring you this. It's the cheese they make out at Stephan's place. It's the best in the whole village."

"Well, I'll be. Give your father, the mayor, my regards." At this point Rust noticed she was gazing intently at him, and so he asked, "What are you looking at?"

"Oh, nothing. Would it be okay if I had a seat?"

"Sure."

Sitting down across the table from him, Sheryl set down her basket and said, "There's something I've wanted to ask you for some time now."

This was the thing Rust feared the most. Nevertheless, he asked in return, "What's that?"

"When your term's up here, where will you go?"

"You mean, do I have somewhere special I'm headed?"

"Yes," said Sheryl, never taking her eyes off his face.

Wishing he could escape her gaze, the lawman replied, "There never has been, and there never will be."

Sheryl looked down at the floor. "Good," she said. She seemed to savor the word. "In that case, you could stay here, couldn't you?"

A terrible calm flowed into Rust's heart. He'd earned the right to just soak in it. He was just about to tell her that was right, but then his ears caught something—the mother shouting out beyond the gates.

"No," Rust said, shaking his head. That'd been a close call. "I don't wanna seem rude, but I'm not like you people. I can't live here like the rest of you do."

"Why not?" Sheryl asked, leaning forward.

The intensity of this girl, who usually spent her days by her father's side with eyes lowered, telling him his schedule or scribbling notes, left Rust more than a little surprised. Her earnest gaze was trained on him. Rust looked away, as if to escape it.

"A person's path in life is set when they're born. It's a legacy from their fathers. Step off that path, and there's no getting back on it again. The next thing you know, you're lost in a fog. Out there, there's a cliff called ruin, but you never know it till you've fallen from it."

"And you—you've fallen, haven't you?"

"Yeah, just once. And ever since, I've been lost."

Closing her eyes, Sheryl said, "Maybe your path led you here. Isn't that conceivable?"

Rust was going to say no, but instead he told her, "Thank you."

"Wouldn't you be good enough to give me a straight answer? The

mayor wants to know, too."

"Someday I will."

"When might that be?"

"Don't look at me that way. I don't know what to do when you look at me like that."

"I just want an answer."

"You'll get it when this business is settled. Judging from the size of last night's explosion, the enemy will be delayed a few days in getting here. But that's all. They'll be coming for sure. Since D, Gil, and the others haven't come back, you could say we've lost more of our strength than the enemy has. Still, the villagers and I have to fight them—and you do, too."

Sheryl gazed at him softly. She didn't see the face of a sheriff gripped by anxiety. It was the face of a hard man who seemed chiseled from stone. "You're right. I got a little ahead of myself. I'm sorry."

As Sheryl was leaving, Lyra came back in. Following her out the door with her eyes, the warrior woman told Rust, "Sorry, but I could hear you from outside. That girl could be in some danger—the danger being that she likes you."

The sheriff said nothing.

"If I were your enemy and I saw how tough you were, I'd use someone important to you to get some leverage."

"You're right."

"What do you intend to do?" Lyra asked bluntly.

"It's obvious. Once this job is finished, we move on. My path is already set."

Lyra nodded. "I'll be the one that puts you down. Don't worry about that."

"See that you do."

The two looked at each other and laughed for the first time in ages.

Just then, the siren that alerted villagers when an emergency had occurred resounded through the night sky.

II

When the pair dashed outside, a guard from the main gates who'd raced there on horseback informed them that Josh and Palau had been spotted. He also said Gil and D weren't with them.

"What could've taken them a full day?" Lyra mused, her lovely features becoming those of an intrepid combatant.

It was clear what she wasn't saying. A party that had gone off to fight a pseudo vampire had returned a day later under darkness of night. It would be odd to think that they were still okay.

Hopping onto the horse tethered in front of his office and speeding to the main gates, Rust inquired, "What about the woman and her child?"

“Apparently she gave in, since she left just five minutes ago.”

“Bad luck. She’ll run right into them, won’t she?”

“That’s right,” the guard replied as they scrambled up to the top of the gates.

The highway had been twisted to run not fifty yards from the gates, and a road thirty feet wide connected it to the village. There were three lights atop the gates that illuminated the ground forty to fifty feet away. It looked like the pair had just stepped from the darkness into the enormous circle of light. No, not a pair—there were four people. Palau had Toic’s wife in his arms, while Josh held the three-year-old boy.

When the four of them had closed to about thirty feet, Rust put a megaphone to his mouth and ordered, “Hold it right there!”

The villagers and mercenaries lined up to either side of him were already drawing a bead on the hearts of the four with bows and firearms.

Palau and Josh halted. Squinting his eyes as if blinded by the light, Josh said, “This is a fine welcome we get! You must’ve seen the damage we managed to do last night. Is this how you greet your heroes?”

“What have you been doing all this time?”

“My horse got taken out,” Palau said, shrugging his shoulders. “The wilderness is crawling with all kinds of monsters. We had to fight our way through them the whole way back. It wouldn’t kill you folks to show us a tad more kindness.”

“You guys know the rules of the Frontier. We’ve gotta check you for wounds. Set those two down first.”

Rust had been able to read the mother’s and child’s expressions. Shivering as if with an ague, they had faces slick with sweat and taut with fear. They looked like death warmed over. They could tell. They knew what the two men with them were now. They knew because the men’s bodies were cold as ice. They weren’t breathing. When the bright light bleached their faces, their lips alone were strangely red, with stark fangs peeking from between them.

“Set those two down and submit to a check. If everything’s fine, you’ll be drinking like fish tonight.”

The two pale warriors looked at each other.

“Did you hear that, Josh?”

“That’s mighty cold of ’em, Palau.”

“So, we gonna do like they say?”

“It ain’t like we’ve got a choice.”

Palau nodded. “We’re setting ’em down now. Get ready to give us that once-over.”

A collective sigh of relief escaped the group on top of the gates. And then, the horror started all over again. Palau’s eyes gave off a red gleam, and the warrior bit down hard on the neck of the trembling woman. It was clear from Josh’s startled expression that his compatriot’s action

was unexpected.

Later, examination of the mother's remains would reveal that she'd badly hurt both hands while pounding on the main gates and trying to get back into the village. Her skin had broken, exposing the raw flesh beneath. Fresh blood had seeped from the wounds as well. Perhaps Palau had been fighting the urges brought on by the red hue of blood from the mother's hand and the scent that lingered in the air, until finally he'd reached a point where he could restrain himself no longer.

The woman's shouts pierced the night, her far-from-slim body twitching in her death throes. The people watching from the gates were frozen. For the first time ever, they were witness to the legendary terror. The Nobility's hegemony over the Frontier had long since ended, and though people saw the victims they left behind, no one but the very eldest had ever witnessed anyone being drained of their blood. But was this how a Noble would feed? No, they drove their fangs in and drank up the lifeblood that spilled out—Palau, however, gave his head a shake that helped him bite halfway through the woman's neck. Bright blood spurted out.

Letting out screams that left the others wanting to cover their ears, the mother flailed her arms. Blood splashed wildly in the brightly lit circle. Palau's face was a nightmare—eyes crimson, fangs stained with blood, cheeks trembling with rapture. Spitting out a chunk of the woman's flesh, he once again drove his face into the gaping, bloody wound.

A gunshot rang out. A small hole opened in the middle of Palau's forehead, and half his face blew off.

Up on the gate, a woman named Miriam shouted, "Got him!"

However, Palau didn't fall. What remained of his mouth twisted into a smile. Flesh swelled in the devastated section, and bone formed. A new eyeball gleamed. Such were the regenerative powers of a vampire.

His fangs once more sank into the woman's neck. They could all hear the sound of him gulping down mouthful after mouthful.

Josh had been standing there looking at his compatriot as if he were an idiot for betraying himself, but at this point his eyes also began to give off a demonic gleam. The face of a carnivore leered at the child. Fangs thirsty for fresh blood went for the pale throat of the boy, who was so completely terrified he couldn't make a sound.

Something whistled through the air and impacted the man's right shoulder. It was a short wooden arrow that sent Josh spinning. He let go of the child, who fell to the ground. Howling, the man prepared to leap, but a second arrow took him through the back of the neck, poking out through his chest. Even writhing on the ground, he still seemed like a wild beast. Though the plain wooden arrow hadn't fatally wounded him, it could hurt Nobility and their ilk ten times worse than conventional weapons.

“Stay up here,” Rust told those around him before jumping. As soon as he landed, he nocked a third arrow and trained it on Palau. Suddenly, Palau lifted the mother’s body up to use as a shield. Though he knew she was beyond saving, Rust didn’t fire.

“Out of the way,” the sheriff heard a familiar voice call out behind him. For a woman to speak in such a tone, she must’ve had a heart of stone, muscles of steel, and nerves of ice.

“What are you here for?” Rust asked.

“If you’re not gonna shoot, take the kid and get out of the way,” Lyra, the warrior woman, told him.

Before he could stop her, her lithe figure calmly moved forward like a blossom swaying in the breeze. Not so much as glancing at Josh, she made directly for Palau.

Firing his third shot into the writhing Josh, Rust dashed over to the child, scooped him up, and fell back to the gates.

Lyra bounded. With a mocking laugh, Palau lifted the still-twitching mother over his head. He stared in amazement as a blade pierced the woman through the heart and sank into his forehead. Lyra was a woman who was willing to stab even an innocent victim to get at the enemy.

“That hurts!” Palau groaned. With his words, bloody foam spilled from his mouth. “It hurts so bad. That’s not right! I’m a Noble now!”

With the longsword impaling both of them still in hand, Lyra landed in front of the man. Her right index finger went for her left hip—and the little gold ring that jutted from it.

Still holding the mother’s corpse, Palau spread his arms as if posing a query. It was an overly dramatic gesture. “Hey, bitch—I’m a Noble. I even drank this woman’s blood. It was sweet. I didn’t think anything could ever taste so good! That’s proof I’m a Noble, right? So why does plain ol’ steel hurt so bad?”

“Because it’s been baptized,” Lyra said coldly, “in the church back in my hometown, wherever that was. Grade-thirteen berenith steel soaked in holy water and hammered ten million times by the swordsmith. Now consider yourself honored and beg for your life.”

Palau charged her. His mouth snapped open wide, his lips and maw both stained bright red.

Something whistled through the air. Lyra had stepped out of the way, and Palau ran by her on the left. But he was running only from the waist down. During five or six more steps, there was an explosion of blood, as if the legs had just splattered against a rock, and then they fell over. The upper body had fallen by Lyra’s side. Its eyes were wide open, looking up at her as if she were beyond belief, but death quickly spread across the face. In the beam of the searchlight, it looked as if a line the color of blood arced into the woman’s hand, but it quickly disappeared.

Lyra turned around. Crawling on all fours like a dog, Josh seemed to take note of his foe, because he lifted the upper half he could barely

support.

"Dooooiii?"

"Dooooiii," Lyra mimicked. Gory blade in hand, she walked over to Josh. Her gait made it clear she was free of hesitation or any hint of mercy for this person who'd been a colleague until a day earlier. "Are you going to fight me, too?" she asked.

"Of course—as sure as I'm a Noble," he declared, his face glowing with bliss.

"You're a fake," was all Lyra said, and she swung her sword down.

Josh wasn't poised to dodge it. The keen sound that rang out didn't seem to be that of cleaving flesh.

"I'll be damned."

Josh hadn't fled. Still down on his knees, he'd merely let his upper body fall again. Lyra's blade had been parried by the rifle across his back. As the warrior woman took a new stance, he swung the weapon around to point its barrel at her torso.

"I didn't wanna have to take you out this way," Josh said, as if apologizing to her.

"Then don't," Lyra replied, ducking down. Her left hand went for the toe of her left boot.

The barrel of the gun followed the movement.

"Nighty-night, warrior woman!"

"Nighty-night, faker."

A long, long stream of fire angled down toward the ground. Rust alone noticed that there were actually two streams, not one. Not only did the forty-millimeter antitank round split in two directly in front of Lyra, but the halves also changed direction, striking the ground in the distance. A ferocious pair of fiery pillars soared up to the heavens. Devoid of noxious flames or black smoke, they were rather lovely.

The people who'd turned to look at them turned back again at the sound of dying screams. Standing bolt upright, Josh had taken Lyra's blessed sword through the throat, with the blade running clean through the crown of his head.

"Adaa . . . adaa . . . adaa . . ."

Managing to sputter something that was not actual words, the giant of a man was slowly being lifted. Who would've thought the woman could achieve such a thing with one slim arm?

Bending her fully extended arm ever so slightly, Lyra gave the massive form a push. As all of Josh's 450 pounds lay suspended over the ground, Lyra swept out with both hands. The traitor was reduced to four chunks of flesh in midair, which fell to the ground with a torrential downpour of blood.

Giving her longsword a single flick to clean off the gore before returning it to its sheath, Lyra walked back toward the gates. When the great doors opened, the space behind them was filled with villagers.

Rust was there, as was Sheryl, who held Toic's son. Halting in front of them, Lyra brushed her hand against the child's cheek.

"Miss," the boy said, breaking into a smile.

Lyra had no idea what sort of expression she wore. Immediately bringing her hand away again, she turned to Rust and told him, "Once dawn comes, exile him to a neighboring village." Her expression was that of a stern and callous warrior.

III

No matter where they looked, they saw the Grim Reaper spreading his wings across the wasteland.

"Oh, it hurts!"

"Gimme some water!"

"I'm so hot . . . I'm burning up, I tell ya, burning up! Please, help me . . ."

"Boss . . . you gotta do something . . ."

As the underlings' pleas and cries of pain blanketed the earth, those wings slowly and gently bore Death to those most gravely wounded. Thirty-two of the sixty were dead on the ground, seven severely wounded, and eighteen slightly injured, plus three more had been killed earlier at the farmhouse—in other words, every member of the Black Death gang was dead or wounded.

There was only one unscathed—one who wasn't counted in that sixty. It wasn't for the sake of the wounded that he was still hanging around. You could tell by the way he took a much deeper breath than normal and blew it out again through pursed lips.

"Boss!" the man tending to an injured outlaw on top of a mound of dirt called out. He was, in a manner of speaking, Toma's right-hand man —Garance "Bad Hand" Borden. His left arm was an artificial limb. "You can't be coming over here. The scent of blood is everywhere, and these guys—"

It was too late. Just the word *boss* had been enough to stir up activity among the hitherto-motionless figures around him. Crawling across blankets, digging their fingers into the earth, and staring up at the heavens, they came to Toma.

A bloodied hand missing its pinky finger grabbed the cuff of his trousers.

"Please . . . help me . . . Boss . . ."

Another latched onto him.

"Me too . . . Don't leave me here . . . I'll do anything . . . I'd kill my own mother. Just . . . save me!"

Another said, "I'm getting cold. And I can't feel my legs no more. I'm begging you, Boss—save me!"

And then they suddenly became a chorus.

“Drink our blood. We don’t care if we’re not the real thing. Please, just make us Nobles.”

“Now there’s a heartwarming refrain,” Toma said, grinning wryly.

“Sorry,” Garance said, his head hung low. “But you can’t really blame ’em. None of these slobs ever imagined getting messed up this badly.”

Toma looked down at the underlings who groveled at his feet. He was like a god looking down upon humanity.

“Okay, get back over here. I’m not finished working on you boys yet,” Garance informed them.

However, the men ignored him. They remained crowded at Toma’s feet. No matter how reckless they were, they couldn’t help but be concerned as death drew near. It was only natural that they were afraid. But there was a chance for them to escape it. And it was very close at hand. Their leader was a pseudo vampire, and anyone he bit would become a pseudo vampire too. That was a promise of eternal life.

“I’m begging you, Boss, drink my blood.”

“Mine, too! Mine, too!”

“I don’t wanna fucking die! Please, save me!”

Though miserable beyond belief, their supplications carried a certain raw desire that needled Toma. And how would he respond to his poor underlings? Staring intently at the men inching in around his feet, he finally said, “Okay, you’ve made your point. I swear by the darkest god, I’ll grant you your wish.” His eyes were aglow as he looked over the whole group. It was blood light they gave off. “But listen well. Know this: death is security. It’s the only peace a human being’s allowed. Call it true release, pleasure, or rapture, if you like. And you’ll be throwing all that away! All for the worthless, base, slobbering pains of the flesh. Just suck it up. Hold it in. Keep fighting. If you can’t do that, go ahead and die. That’s what it is to be human. But if you *really* can’t take it anymore, if you’re afraid of unknowable death and the darkness it invites, then fine.”

Bending down, he grabbed one of them by the chin and hauled him up.

“Swear to me, Sumatro. Swear you’ll never complain about this.”

“Boss . . .”

“Swear it, Sumatro. You won’t last two minutes more.”

“Save me . . . I swear it. No matter what happens . . . I’ll never . . . complain.”

“Good. Very good. The rest of you, swear it too. Swear it by the eternally unending dark, by the pitch-black solitude, by the devil of the void.”

“I swear it.”

“I swear.”

“You’ll get no complaints here.”

“I’ll never complain.”

“I swear to you.”

“No complaints.”

“Yes, yes, yes!” Toma said, puffing out his chest. “Then I’ll grant your wish. The loftiest and most ignorant thing a person can wish for in this world. First, Sumatro and Dacia.”

Garance saw their leader reach down, grab his men by the throat, and lift them up. He heard a beastly growl. Toma bit into Sumatro’s neck.

“Shiiiiiiiiit!”

Was this the cry that usually escaped the pitiable victim of a Noble? No. In fog-shrouded forests, on night highways bright with moonlight, or in bedrooms serenaded by a gypsy violin’s doleful nocturnes, victims who felt ivory fangs drive into their blue veins let out the sweet moans of sexual climax. But this was a scream. It was the voice of the damned tasting the agonies of hell. This positively wasn’t the sort of initiation one should have into the Nobility.

Tossing the twitching body of his underling to the ground like it was a dishrag, he said, “Dacia’s next.”

The figures around Toma began to inch away. In the moonlight, their faces were as pale and expressionless as Noh masks. They were afraid. A fear that surpassed the hellish torment had taken root in them. In other words, dying would be better than this.

“Where are you going?” asked Toma. He’d lifted Dacia up high, his grip tearing open the man’s throat, and now he drank the lifeblood that spilled out as if it were beer. The dripping blood spattered his pale face and stained his body with something like a map of insanity. “Where are you going?”

“Help, Boss!” his followers cried. The wording of their plea was exactly the same, but the meaning completely the opposite.

“We don’t mind dying now. Spare us!”

“I don’t want my stinkin’ life!”

“I wanna die human!”

Each mouth spouted words that were very human in perspective.

One man’s face burst like a watermelon. Blobs of a substance more viscous than blood went flying in all directions, like a scream. As another man turned in amazement, his face smashed like a tomato. And another—this one like a pomegranate. And another. And another.

Before long, a gunshot echoed in the moonlight. Those trying to flee looked toward the sound and halted. They saw what they had desired. Sumatro stood framed against the disk of the moon. As he loaded a fresh round into his smoking rifle, the man who’d risen from the dead stated proudly, “Look at me. The rest of you want to be like this, don’t you? And you can be. You don’t have to die now. Just look at me. I used to be lucky to hit anything two times out of ten with this rifle, and now I can

hit the mark every damned time. Hey, Garance—take that gun of yours you're so fond of and try shooting me."

A dark tinge of anger colored the face of the second in command. Sumatro had occupied the very lowest position among all the gang members. "My gun was made for better things than shooting some asshole that just got made into a second-rate Noble."

"What are you talking about? Don't be so full of yourself, Mr. Second in Command. You're just a normal human now. And me? I'm an heir to the Nobility!"

"Don't make me laugh, you lousy fake."

As luck would have it, at the very same time, Lyra was saying almost exactly the same thing at the main gates to the village.

"Come again?" Sumatro snarled, eyes burning deep in his skull.

But behind him, someone called out, "Hey!"

When he turned, gleaming black steel slashed through him at an angle, entering at the left nape of his neck and exiting again at his right hip.

"Gaaaaaaaah!"

Dropping his rifle, he reeled backward, his top half sliding down along the diagonal slice.

"Boss—why'd you do that?" Sumatro wailed, teeth bared.

Sheathing his sword on his back, Toma asked him, "Does that hurt? Are you in pain?"

"Of course. Of course it does. Hey!"

The man held both arms out in front of himself. The upper half of his body slid down the slope of the diagonal slash, then halted. Sumatro pushed it back, heaving a heavy sigh once he finally had it where it belonged. His whole body was covered with blood and sweat. It was a harsh price to pay for proof of indestructibility.

"Don't you all get it? This is how I am now. I'm one of the Nobility! This is the power of a vampire. If I get wounded, it still hurts. But I won't die. I won't grow old, either. Come on, everybody. Have the boss make Nobles out of you!"

The receding tide once again changed direction.

"Boss, drink my blood!"

"Drink mine!"

"Make me a Noble, too!"

"And me!"

Life and death were the only proof a human being had that they were human. Now, they were trying to evade the laws of the universe.

Looking down at the bloodied faces of the wriggling mass of men at his feet, the leader said, "Okay. Leave it to me." After this masterful remark, none of them caught Toma's next words: "Throw away your humanity like idiots."

Ten minutes later, his underlings' wishes had been granted, and that

was all that was required. A huge smile on his face, Toma slapped his hands together. “Let’s go! Get a move on, you fakes! Fakes, just like me! We’ll test your new strength with a night attack. I sent three along ahead of us. After disposing of them, the village of Geneve will have their guard down—so let’s get over there!”

There was a battle cry that seemed to rise from the bowels of the earth. “Yeeeeeeeeah!” they shouted as one. All eleven of them.

THE WORK OF A MURDERER

CHAPTER 6

I

Perhaps the moon was mourning. Lamenting the fact that it was such a beautiful moonlit night. Wondering why humans were always killing one another. But the moon's grief was somewhat misdirected. The eleven shadowy figures now dashing across the wilderness couldn't be called *human*. Each had eyes tinged blood red, and from between lips twisted in deadly rapture there poked ferocious fangs—fangs that gnashed, showing just how these men trembled with expectations of blood and slaughter. They had no need for horses. Their legs carried them three times as fast as they had when they were human, and they never tired. Those crimson eyes could see through the darkness of night as if it were midday.

The saplings and high grass ahead of them swayed with the night breeze. They were about to leap over them without the slightest hesitation when everyone halted ten feet shy. That they came to a dead stop without even breaking form was testament to their amazing new physical prowess. There wasn't even a sound when their feet hit the ground.

All eyes turned in unison to the front of the pack. Their run had been cut short by an object that had rolled out in front of them. A skull.

Who threw that?

Their eyes shot to the bushes. At that instant, there was the sound of something else landing behind the brush. Not surprisingly, it was another skull, pale in their night vision.

All eleven saw the same thing simultaneously—a stark pillar of flame reaching up into the heavens behind the bushes. After a second, they leaped back, recognizing the white pillar for what it was. It wasn't there. There were no flames, no fiery column. All there was at present was something that caused icy-cold beads of sweat to form on the brows of the eleven men—an eerie aura that was not of this world.

"I'll be damned," Toma murmured. "I remember this place. I should've finished you off so that you'd never have to hear the song of the dead a second time. No, I don't suppose stabbing you once more would be any different, would it?"

"Let's go, boss," one of them cried. It was Sumatro. A deadly automatic rifle stretched from his right hand.

The men said nothing, their stunned faces turning to Toma as one. They'd expected him to instantly give them the command to move out.

"Let's roll!" one of them urged testily.

Just then, they heard the exquisite voice of the darkness, filled with inhuman ecstasy, coming from beyond the bushes. "Come," it said.

"D," Sumatro groaned as if his mouth were gnawing on the inky blackness.

"D," Dacia said, the darkness he bit off staining his teeth.

"D," someone else said.

"D!"

"D!"

"D!"

But how did they all know that name?

Though they knew who it was, the shadowy figure in the bushes remained melded with the darkness.

"Boss?" Sumatro said in a voice choked with the terror of someone who'd realized the truth.

Toma was frightened. A fear beyond mortal ken clearly clung to his hardened features. What was he afraid of? Wasn't the Nobility just another name for the rulers of the night? *Fear not; the night is your world!*

A change came over his face. Little by little, his lips twisted into a new shape. A smile. He jabbed a misshapen finger in the direction of the bushes. "Go!" he yelled, as if he himself were leading the charge.

Sumatro pulled the trigger. A fireball exploded in the darkness—a bullet from a gun that would never miss again.

"*Go!*"

Six of the men charged into the brush, the wind swirling in their wake. Their palpable lust for slaughter rapidly moved forward—then vanished unexpectedly.

Toma's face froze, as if at the bidding of the darkness. What had awaited them? Was this stillness their fate? There was no echo of blade against blade, no shots ringing out, just the moonlight. No, something else drifted through the night. Toma sniffed at the air.

"The smell of blood," he said, his voice quavering. His shoulders, his head, his entire body also trembled faintly but quickly. Bones cracked in his tightly balled fist. "Blood! Blood! Blood! How many died? Tell me that, D!"

The darkness kept its silence.

"Boss?" one of remaining men inquired. "Should we, uh, go?"

He shook his head. "What a fine stench."

"Huh?" the man said, unable to understand his superior, who gazed raptly up at the moon.

"Don't you think so? The blood is life. And life is sweet. The founts of life for half a dozen men—ah, I was right to send them in there."

Bewildered, his underling stammered, "Boss . . . you mean to tell me . . . you purposely sent them to . . ."

Toma called into the bushes, "You can hear me, can't you, D? I'm going to fight you again now. But I must rise to the occasion. Kindly return the corpses of the six men you cut down—those fresh, still-dripping dead." He extended both arms, beseeching his unseen foe.

“Boss?” The underling aimed the long spear he carried at Toma. “How *could* you? Those were our guys—and my kid brother!”

Toma stared back at the man’s face, ablaze with murderous intent. “Get that spear up!” he told him.

“What?”

“Everyone, spears up! If you don’t have one, raise your guns. Point your swords to the sky!”

Something threw a shadow across the moon. It was said there were canals on the lunar surface dug by the Nobility. As if hurled from those same canals, a black form sailed through the air, impaled without warning on an underling’s long spear. Another man had a long spear. Two others had rifles. Three corpses fell, skewered on them as if by magic.

Toma drew both his swords. Bodies fell on each of them, too. The last deliveries from the heavens were Sumatro and Dacia. As if testing the weight of the dead, Toma thrust both arms toward the sky with all his strength.

“Oh, they don’t have heads,” he practically moaned.

The air instantly grew dense.

“What the—”

Perhaps he’d been standing there all along. It didn’t seem strange that a figure of otherworldly beauty stood in front of the bushes. A man that gorgeous could work miracles. He moved forward smoothly.

The outlaws couldn’t fathom what was about to occur; perhaps their newfound immortality made them complacent. Before they could knock the corpses from their weapons, they saw gleams of light sinking into their own chests.

Without a glance at the falling dead and their crumbling remains, the death dealer in black walked toward Toma.

“Take that!”

Toma swung both arms down. The corpses flew from his swords and struck the approaching figure in the chest and hip but bounced off him. At the same time, Toma was sent flying. Crashing into a stand of trees fifteen feet away, he came to a halt. A heavy object slammed into his stomach. When it fell to the ground, he saw that it was Dacia’s severed head.

Catching his breath, Toma jumped back, but at that instant a sword blade slashed deep into the nape of his neck. Falling over clumsily, he struggled desperately to his feet. The shadowy figure was bearing down on him like a great mountain, his sword raised to strike. The squeal the outlaw let out as he prepared to parry the blow was one of terror.

The figure swung his one sword down at the two the leader held over his head. A clang rang out. The sword was stopped—but only for a heartbeat. The steel of Toma’s two blades shattered easily, and his head split in two. As the outlaw leader sank limply, the blade that had just

been pulled from him made a ruthless thrust into his chest.

Look at me, D. Look at the expression of supreme bliss I wear! the leader thought briefly, and then he was swallowed by the darkness.

A breeze blew by as if to appease the incredible silence of the moonlight.

"I'm at a loss for words," said the hoarse voice that rose from the death-strewn wastes. "It took me a full day to regenerate. Did being dead that long make you this crazy? Or was the problem that as soon as you came back to life, all these wannabe Nobles came along, stinking of blood? Whatever it was, you sure let loose on them! If I had to choose one word to describe it, it would be *brutal*."

The shadowy figure said nothing as he sheathed his sword. The mysterious emptiness that came to the victor at the battle's end coiled mercilessly around the young man.

"At any rate, the threat to the village of Geneve is gone. Without their leader, they're just a flock of crows. They couldn't make it a thousand yards before scattering to the four winds. I think we can call this a job well done—huh?" the source of the voice exclaimed, noticing that D hadn't taken his hand from the hilt of the weapon he'd sheathed. "What is it? Are there stragglers, or some kind of monster?"

D made no reply, remaining poised for deadly action, but before long he brought his hand away from his weapon, saying, "Let's go."

Once he began walking, there was no further hesitation. Never looking back, the elegant silhouette melted into the darkness.

And then in a section of the wilderness where death alone lay, the moonlight shone down and the wind blew in feeble sobs. Time passed, irrespective of death, and when a *presence* appeared, it seemed to come from the same stream of time. It had no form, no color; it was merely a presence, so tremendously large it covered the wilderness, driving the darkness mad and making the moonlight sing a requiem for the dead. The presence seemed to creep over to Toma's remains.

Do you want to live? it seemed to ask.

There was immediately a response. *No . . . not anymore. Please, just leave me at rest.*

Fine. I'll make you live. Live as a true Noble.

That was all there was to it.

From Toma's left eye, a single crimson thread slowly began to rise into the air. On closer inspection, the same threads rose from all the corpses that lay there, tingeing the moonlight with red.

This is the thread of life, unknown to all. All that remains is to tie it once more, the presence chanted in the void. *This isn't over yet, D!*

II

"Old man!" someone called to him. In the dark cloud of his besotted

consciousness, the cry spread like a liquid, forming a crack from which the voice issued. “Wake up, old man. It’s me!”

Old Man Roskingpan used his hand to pry open his crusty lids. His eyes were bloodshot from drinking. The old man lived in a house that stood alone on the western edge of the village. Though he frequently went out, no one really came to see him. These days, he couldn’t even recall the faces of the wife and child he’d lost to a mountain tsunami years earlier. He’d also forgotten how he’d burned the photograph that sat on his desk, because it caused him nothing but pain. As he looked all around, he thought that he must’ve been dreaming.

“The window, old man,” the voice seemed to whisper in his ear, and as he was turning to look, pain shot through his neck and shoulder. The aches raced all the way down to his waist. Though everything else was growing fuzzy, this alone grew sharper with the passing years.

“Who the hell is it? At this hour, of all things . . .”

It took him thirty seconds just to turn toward the window. Aside from a sole burning candle, the room was completely dark. Someone’s face was pressed against the window, with its black panes of glass and white frame.

“You . . . You’re that hired gun . . . Gil, was it?”

“That’s right. Let me in.”

“What brings you out here? State your business.”

The sieve that was his memory still retained bits and pieces of the incident he’d become involved in the previous night, as well as the fact that this giant of a man was one of the three mercenaries who’d gone off with D on a demolition mission. As far as Roskingpan knew, the four of them hadn’t come back.

“I brought some medicine that’ll fix what ails you, old man.”

It was quite a distance from the bed to the window. Yet the old man’s brain found nothing peculiar about how clearly he could make out the words of someone speaking in a low voice through thick glass.

“What ails me? Ain’t got no such problems.”

“I’m sure every muscle in your body aches,” the mercenary said. “Even the littlest movement makes it feel like you’re coming apart at the shoulders, elbows, and knees, right? Your eyes don’t see so well, hands and feet don’t move as nimbly as you’d like—that’s what I’d say ails you.”

There was no denying that he’d drunk at the saloon with the mercenary two or three times, but the old man still didn’t understand why he’d come there in the middle of the night to talk to him. “Well, as far as that stuff goes, just wait; you’ll get there someday, too. If you came out here to make fun of me, you can go right on back.”

“No, I can fix you.”

It took a few seconds for the old man to ask, “What? Stop yanking my chain!”

"I'm not joking with you. Let me in and see for yourself. I'm not gonna do anything. I don't figure an old-timer like you has a bunch of money stashed, so I've got no reason to try anything, do I? In another couple of hours, I've gotta leave the village. Figured the least I could do was help you out a little."

Staring for a while at the enormous face barely illuminated by the candlelight, the old man got out of bed. The motion was enough to make his back hurt, with jolts shooting down his spine. The taste of booze lingered in his mouth. It was on account of the alcohol that he decided to accept the implausible explanation for the mercenary's visit.

It took quite a while to walk over to the door, where he undid the bolt. He was terribly short of breath. But Roskingpan didn't have to do anything further. The door opened from the other side, and the huge form came in, along with a black wind.

"I have to be invited in first," Gil muttered, oddly enough, looking down at the old man. His eyes were giving off a red glow.

"But you're . . ." the old man murmured, backing away at the sight of the fangs that poked from between the man's thick lips. "No . . . Don't tell me you're . . ."

"See, while two of my buddies were causing a commotion, I came over the west wall. There's a spot that's not too tough to climb. Of course, the way I am now, no wall's gonna stop me any more than a bank of clouds would." Leering at the terrified old man, Gil said, "I was lying when I said I was leaving soon. That bit about wanting to help you was bullshit, too. But don't worry none. I'll keep my promise. In return, I need a little help from you. Okay? I'm counting on you."

The old man finally realized that the tales he'd heard countless times since childhood, each time with an admonishment, were talking about precisely what was happening to him now. Pointing to the chair beside him, he said, "Okay. Have a seat, then."

It was nearly noon of the next day when D returned. Permitted entry to the village after a strict check, he told the people assembled there that all of the enemy's long-range ordnance had been destroyed.

"I knew we could count on you," Rust said, eyes agleam.

"What about the mercenaries?" the Hunter asked him.

With a dour face, Rust related the previous night's unholy battle from start to finish.

"Did you look for Gil?" D asked.

"We've been searching for him since last night."

Nodding, D said, "It's probably safe to assume he's already slipped in. Be on the lookout for any villagers acting suspiciously, too. He'll need somewhere to hide."

"We're already looking into that," Lyra interjected from where she stood beside Rust.

“Well, that’s just dandy—you’re like a grown-up man with her help, eh?” a hoarse voice said suddenly. Rather than getting angry, they all looked at D with bulging eyes.

“There’s something we need to discuss,” D said to Rust.

“Sure thing. I have to go tell the mayor what you accomplished. Wait for me back at my office.”

Rust raced off in his skeleton vehicle, leaving Lyra behind.

As the Hunter headed toward the office down a road where the scent of grass and the smell of earth wafted by, the hoarse voice inquired in a reproachful tone, “Why didn’t you tell them you took out the enemy’s leader?”

“Just a hunch.”

“A hunch?”

“I slew him. But I get the feeling he hasn’t been destroyed yet.”

“That’s preposterous. He’s already rotting away! There’s only one person with the power to come back from that.”

Nothing from the Hunter except a meaningful look.

“Hey, are you serious? But I didn’t sense anything!”

“It’s just a hunch.”

“Well, if *he* gets involved, when that guy rises from the dead he’ll be just like a Noble. You think it’ll be just the leader?”

D didn’t answer.

“It might be that we’ve ended up throwing gasoline on the fire. What’ll you do?”

Again, there was no reply.

“Against ten Nobles, this village’s defenses would be like thin air. Even you’d be in danger.”

Once the figure of unearthly beauty had walked out of their field of view, the villagers let the tension drop from their shoulders at last.

“When I see a looker like him, suddenly I don’t give a crap about outlaws or this village or anything.”

“Ain’t that the truth. Folks better keep their wives and daughters locked indoors!”

“That reminds me, it was about this time last year Belgo’s wife disappeared, wasn’t it?”

“That’s right,” another man said, pounding his fist into the palm of his other hand. “I wonder whatever became of Tajina’s daughter and old Mrs. Colbecky’s husband.”

“That stud of a drifter probably came to town and got ’em to leave with him before anyone was wise to him.”

“No doubt,” said another, and they all laughed at the man’s joke, but then the air grew uncomfortable and they held their tongues.

Apparently trying to make amends, the man who’d joked about it said, “Though that guy could probably find them, eh?” He grinned at the others, but they all looked away.

Finally, one of them said, “When the outlaws get here, all hell’s gonna break loose. Anyone goes missing then, and they’ll never be found, just like those others. We’d all better stay on our toes, okay?”

Nodding at that, the members of the group dispersed to return to their respective posts.

The man who’d made the joke halted and watched the others go. “Now I’ve heard it all. You guys haven’t been on your toes a day in your lives,” he said, grinning and reaching around to pat the back of his waistband. What he really wanted to do was pull the blade out and lick it. “It doesn’t matter how many people disappear; they’ll never get it through their thick heads.”

The man was Billy.

Rust was adamantly opposed to D’s suggestion that all the villagers gather in one place while they dispensed with the Black Death gang. It was an hour after D’s return, and they were back at the sheriff’s office. The mayor, Sheryl, and even Odama were present as well.

“The women and children I can understand. But I can’t figure why you’d send men there who could contribute to the fight. Even without their missiles and laser, the enemy will be strong with a pseudo Noble to lead them. We’ll need every combatant we can get.”

The expression Rust had used, “pseudo Noble,” was synonymous with “pseudo vampire.” Different people preferred one term or the other.

“They won’t be attacking the same way,” said D.

“What do you mean by that?” Lyra inquired in a low voice.

Suddenly, D’s voice changed. In a hoarse tone, he said, “I’ve been keeping quiet about this so as not to cause undue alarm, but most of the enemy have been turned into pseudo Nobles.”

The room became an icebox.

Squeezing his left hand closed, D said with a certain resignation, “This is unverified, as I only saw him from a distance, but there’s a chance their leader possesses the same power as a true Noble.”

“The real thing?” the sheriff said in a dazed tone no one there had heard him use before.

“No, if he’s not a pure Noble, he’d have to be the same as all the other second-rate wannabes,” Lyra said, shaking her head. Resolutely, she added, “We’ve got any number of ways to deal with him. D, are you sure about what you just said?”

“Nope,” the hoarse voice responded.

“Cut the comedy with the ventriloquist act. That crummy little voice doesn’t suit you.”

“I’m certain,” D assured her.

Furrowing her brow, Lyra said, “If that’s the case, then the enemy—”

“They’ll probably scale the wall under cover of darkness. All they’ll

have to do is jump over it."

"Once they're inside, it's hopeless," the hoarse voice said, seeming to bait Lyra.

The mayor nipped that in the bud, asking, "What do you make of this, Sheriff?"

"I'm with him. Against one pseudo Noble we'd have been okay, but even five would be more than our present defenses could keep out. And once they're inside, they'll be tough to hit. Add to that a real Noble, or a vampire of comparable strength to one, and it'd be impossible to stop them."

"You're worthless!" Deputy Mayor Odama barked, slamming his fist down on the table. Huffing and puffing, he continued, "Mr. Mayor, the villagers and I will hold you strictly accountable for hiring this incompetent as our sheriff. I feel I should demand a recall election for both of you, right here and now."

"And you'd take control of everything?" Lyra said.

Something in the way she said it made the deputy mayor redirect his insolence at her. "Take control? No, be in control? If that's what you meant, come out and say it. It's simply that—"

There was a click from Lyra's left hand. It was the sound of a hammer being cocked. A tiny pistol was pressed against Odama's temple. Of modest caliber, it was small enough to conceal in the palm of her hand.

III

"This is what they call a derringer. She's a cute little gal, but when she shows her teeth, even the big men fall for her."

"You . . . You miserable bitch . . . A lowly drifter like you . . . turning on your employers . . ."

"I'm a sheriff's deputy now. Do I have to make your earlobe go the way of your nose to teach you to watch your mouth?"

"Stop it," Rust told her, but Lyra simply pressed the derringer even harder. Odama cried out in pain.

"Okay, go ahead and tell us who's in charge. But you'd better make it quick. And if you go back on your word once this is all over, I'll blow your head off on the spot."

"That's enough, Lyra," the mayor told her gruffly. "He, like you and us, still has a lot to do, both in our present emergency and beyond. We'll need a man like Mr. Odama."

"Him! I didn't know pissants whose only talent was for complaining were in short supply." Pulling the derringer away, Lyra uncocked the hammer and gave her left wrist a flick. The weapon vanished.

As he mopped at his sweat, Odama glared at the warrior woman, but he couldn't say a word.

"Getting back to the topic at hand, Mr. Mayor," Rust said, "if what D says is true, I'd have to retract my earlier statement. We'll have no choice but to assemble the villagers in one place while we take care of the attacking Noble and the fakes."

"What do you intend to do if they launch an attack? Pseudo vampires can turn those they bite into more pseudo vampires. Can you protect the whole village with just twenty mercenaries?"

"Seventeen. But it'd probably be impossible even with two hundred."

"Then what are you going to do?" Sheryl asked, hugging her father's briefcase close.

"Go out and hit them again before they get here."

Everyone stared at D.

"The enemy will probably be expecting that, and there's no denying it's reckless. I'll go out alone."

"Just a second, there—didn't it take you a full day to get back here because you were injured? There's no way you can head right back out there. And no way in hell would you be doing it alone. There are plenty of people from the village we could spare for a special strike force, but you're critical to our cause!"

"That's right," Rust said, nodding. "You're the one person we can't afford to lose. Plus, I want your help in tracking down Gil. To be honest, I sorely regret letting you go out last time."

"Well, of course you do," a hoarse voice remarked.

But that comment was lost beneath a more dignified voice asking, "Do you have a detailed map of the village?"

"To search for Gil? We'd really appreciate that."

D spread out the map the lawman immediately produced, while Rust began to explain, "As it stands, the areas we've already checked are—"

"If you've missed him, it's the same as if they were never checked at all," the Hunter stated flatly. "I'll handle it personally."

According to the map, the search was being made starting at the walls and sweeping in toward the center of the village.

Running his eyes over the houses that were checked off in red, D said, "Which of these houses belong to someone over the age of seventy, or someone younger who has a grave medical condition or an incurable disease?"

"What are you driving at?" Lyra asked skeptically.

"If you were on your deathbed and someone promised to make you better in exchange for harboring them, what would you do? What if they told you they could cure you of every sickness and stop the effects of aging?"

"I see. That's just the sort of thing a Noble would do," the mayor conceded with a solemn nod. "Yes, indeed."

Everyone was staring at him.

"What is it?" he asked.

“Sheryl, how old is the mayor?” Lyra inquired. The warrior wasn’t one to mince words.

“I’m sixty-eight,” the mayor replied.

Lyra gazed at his secretary.

“He’s seventy,” she said, and though he was her own father, there was no helping the stern look in her eye. The threat they faced was the Nobility, after all.

There were twenty-three houses meeting D’s criteria, and a total of fifty-nine occupants. After gathering them all in front of the sheriff’s office, D began to question them. The sun had already set.

Because of the danger they would be in if the enemy decided to strike, Lyra and Rust both had to leave the room. Still concerned, Lyra peeked in through the window to see D asking the elderly villagers to have a seat one at a time, gazing intently at each one’s face. The Hunter was so handsome; just peeking in at him made Lyra feel dizzy. The cheeks of the withered old men and women flushed when D peered at their faces. He then asked them two or three questions, which the elderly villagers answered with dazed expressions. Lyra knew what all the questions and answers were, since she could read lips.

D asked, “Did anyone come to see you last night and ask you to hide them?”

Each of the elderly or infirm villagers answered, “No.”

It went quickly. The questioning that began at dusk was finished in an hour and a half. And it took that long only because some of them arrived late.

There still remained eight people who were bedridden and couldn’t come.

“Why not do it tomorrow?” Lyra suggested.

“Because *they* won’t wait,” D replied, exiting the sheriff’s office.

Just then, one of the villagers on patrol duty came running in, his face pale. “Sheryl’s been attacked!” he announced in a shrill voice.

Sheryl had been taken to the village medical center.

Needing to verify some things for a reply that was due by the following day regarding trade negotiations to be held with the Capital the following month, she’d gone out after her father, who was doing an inspection of the village with Rust. The mayor and the others were supposed to be back at the sheriff’s office in another thirty minutes. According to the town hall worker who’d discovered her, Sheryl had declined the guard other workers tried to assign her and gone out alone. Still believing her to be in danger, the same worker had then followed, finding her lying flat on her back in the middle of the street not fifty yards from the town hall.

Sheryl’s face was strangely pale and had the eyes of a corpse, and the

group that formed around her was speechless.

"This was no coincidence, was it?" Lyra said.

Rust, who'd rushed there a little later than everyone else, conceded, "No, probably not. It's a ploy to throw us into a panic."

"Mr. Mayor, just what do you intend to do?" Deputy Mayor Odama inquired triumphantly. "We can't allow anyone who's been bitten by a Noble to remain within our defensive perimeter—not even Sheryl. It would mean diverting essential personnel to keep watch over her, and we have no guarantee she wouldn't attack them too."

"I know," the mayor answered with resolve. There wasn't a trace of remorse to be seen in him. "Sheryl's to be transferred to the quarantine facility to the west. I'll leave the rest to the sheriff."

No one voiced any objection. The correct course of action was laid out for just such cases as this. They all recognized that the deputy mayor was justified in what he said, and the mayor's instructions were appropriate.

With a toss of his chin, Rust indicated that D should join him in the neighboring sickroom. It was vacant.

"Do you know who did it?" Rust asked D. He'd seen D place his left hand against the pair of fang marks on Sheryl's neck. He had a hunch about what the Hunter had been doing.

"It was the work of someone bitten by a pseudo Noble. Gil, most likely."

"Wow, you can tell that much? Did you get a location for him?"

"Don't ask for the moon."

Slapping his hand to his forehead, Rust said, "You're right. We need to hunt him down as fast as we can. In the meantime—" He cut himself off without mentioning the need to escort Sheryl into quarantine.

The lawman was just about to leave when D told him, "Hold on. Where can I find the village laws in writing?"

"Pretty much anywhere—see, there's a copy right there."

Eyeing the thick volume bound in black leather wedged into the bookshelf, D asked, "Have you read the whole thing?"

"Well, all the parts that are still pertinent."

"Give me five minutes."

"For what?"

Saying nothing, D went over to the bookshelf, took the volume in question, flipped through all its pages, and then returned with it tucked under one arm. Ignoring Rust, he stepped out of the room. When he returned, he had the mayor and the others with him. Before the skeptical group he thumbed through the regulations, saying, "There's no need to banish your secretary."

Everyone's eyes widened.

"How can you know that?" Odama suddenly snapped at him.

"Because Sheryl was drained of blood. And Gil was bitten by a

pseudo Noble. And it's all in your regulations, in the most basic laws, codified when the village was established and still in force today." D pointed a finger at the page. "It's in the oldest laws, article four, paragraph eight."

Tapping the passage in question with his finger, the Hunter slid the thick tome down the table, and it stopped in front of Odama. Furrowing his brow with suspicion, the deputy mayor ran his eyes across the page. A look of astonishment twisted his pudgy face.

"Read it," D told him, his low voice reverberating in the silence of the sickroom.

After some hesitation, Odama picked up the volume, scanned it once more, and began to speak. "*Article four: On the handling of victims of the Nobility. Paragraph eight: When a surviving victim of a Noble's bite perpetrates the same act on another, the banishment of the latter victim is prohibited.* That's all it says."

The mayor broke into a smile. "We have our predecessors to thank, Odama!"

"No, not so fast, Mr. Mayor!" Odama shouted, pointing at D. "How do we know it was the victim of a pseudo Noble who got Sheryl? Who can prove to me that this man isn't a colossal liar and a cheat—aaaah!"

D's left hand had latched onto the wrist of the hand the deputy mayor had extended. To all appearances, he held it lightly and gently—yet the deputy mayor was unable to move a muscle.

"Come with me," D said, leading the flabbergasted man back into Sheryl's room. The physician on duty greeted them with an odd look. Taking the hand of the speechless deputy mayor, D pressed it to Sheryl's wounds.

One second passed and became two.

The deputy mayor's entire face suddenly relaxed. Looking as if he'd just been exorcised of a demon, he looked at Sheryl and D, confessing in a dazed tone, "Yes, I see. The culprit was exactly as described in that article just now. My apologies. Also, the killers who attacked the mayor at the stables were working for me."

The physician gasped.

Shock clung to the deputy mayor's face. Bowing his head to the mayor, who stood by the door, he stepped out as if to escape D's grasp.

No one bothered to ask what'd happened. On the Frontier, they learned to keep quiet and accept it when a miracle occurred.

"I'll go around and check out the rest of them," D said, turning to leave.

"Hey!" Rust called to him. "Was that some new kind of hypnotism you just used? And another thing—were you able to memorize all those rules and regulations just by flipping through the pages?"

D said nothing.

"Oh, one thing more. How'd you happen to notice what that

particular article was about? For a second there, I thought you might've written it."

"I watched it being written."

"What?" That must have been fifty years earlier. Rust was stunned, but then he remembered something. "Oh, that's right . . . You're a dhampir, aren't you?"

D turned away again and started walking. He simply shut them out. It probably didn't matter to the Hunter anyway.

"He's a hell of a man, isn't he?" Lyra exclaimed. "All those good looks . . . and apparently everything else about him is just as incredible."

"You can say that again," Rust concurred.

At this point, the mayor said, "He's so damned handsome, I forgot to thank him."

"Well, we have to be heading out on patrol," Rust told him, and he and Lyra walked away. After going about a dozen paces, they turned and looked.

The mayor had both hands straight by his sides and his head bowed low with respect.

A MERE SKIRMISH

CHAPTER 7

I

D traveled around to see the remaining eight aged or infirm villagers, who were spread out over six households. In less than an hour, he had pared his list down to one: Sergei Roskingpan.

"He's also a suspected sleeper agent for the enemy," the hoarse voice said with apparent relish. "The other two suspects—Miriam Sarai and Codo Graham—weren't on our list. The sheriff says he's got someone keeping an eye on Roskingpan, but there's no telling what's happened in all this commotion. Well, looks like you could wrap this up neatly, eh?"

The cyborg horse carrying D trotted beside a thin stream. The moon glittered on the water's surface. D's form was bleached by a stark glow. A swarm of ball-lightning bugs had just passed by him. Then the glow came back again. They lingered around him for a while, and presently flew off. Darkness tinged his handsome features.

A dilapidated shack of a farmhouse came into view, squatting over the running water. The house leaned to one side, making it look like a parallelogram with a roof set on top. Judging by the way light spilled from its window, its occupant apparently was going about his daily life.

"It's that old man, Sergei Roskingpan—there's proof he's involved in something. Watch yourself."

To the left of the road was a field of vegetables. D's eyes could make out orderly rows of globe cabbage against the dark earth. While the Hunter was still forty or fifty feet away, the door of the house opened, allowing faint light and a stocky figure to spill out. It had to be Old Man Roskingpan.

"You're a sleeper agent, after all, aren't you?" murmured the hoarse voice in a tone so low D alone could hear it.

The old man didn't even look in their direction. He cut straight across the street and into the cabbage patch. And then, after sizing up a number of them, he grabbed the biggest cabbage with both hands and pulled for all he was worth. It came out of the ground with ease. Though reeling drunkenly, the old man narrowly managed to maintain his balance, hurrying across the street again and into his house. The door closed.

"What the hell's his story? He's a cabbage thief? That's just pathetic!" the left hand griped.

Getting off his cyborg horse in front of the house, D wound his steed's reins around the hitching post and knocked on the door.

"What do you want? Get outta here!" the old man shouted as rudely as he could through the door.

"Pardon me," D said, pushing the door open and going in.

Suddenly, there was a bang. Pioneers had carried Pullois handguns for self-defense, and the one the old man had in hand had just put its first round through the ceiling, where it would need to be patched later. The pistol shook like a leaf as he managed to bring it to bear on D's chest.

"Stop," D said, taking a giant stride toward the old man.

"Stay back, you cabbage-swiping bastard!" the old man shouted, tossing in every curse he knew as he fired a second shot.

Though the bullet came out, it didn't hit D, and the gun exploded. The barrel blew apart, its fragments embedding themselves in the walls and ceiling. Knocked on his ass by both the concussive force and surprise, the old man found his gray hair tinged even grayer by powder drifting down from the explosion.

D clapped his hands together. They were filthy from smoke and gunpowder. By putting the palm of his left hand over the barrel of the gun, he'd caused the gas to reverse direction when the weapon was fired, making it explode. At the same time, his right hand had shielded the old man's face. The iron fragments stuck in him rained down onto the floor, where there was a foot-and-a-half-wide wooden plank running from below the south window to below the north, probably intended to allow the old man to scoop water from the stream that ran beneath his home.

"Settle down and hear me out," D said, gazing at the old man. "Or else I'll eat that cabbage you've got there."

It wasn't often that the young man joked like that.

The result of the Hunter's interrogation was that nothing was out of the ordinary. As D's dark eyes threatened to swallow his soul, Old Man Roskingpan had shaken his head to every question. D excused himself and was about to leave when Roskingpan offered to serve him up some tasty fried cabbage if he'd stay and talk awhile.

"Ah, the folks in town are a cold bunch. When I was a young man, people used to suck up to me and tell me my muscles were the pride of the village and such, but now that I'm old and broken down, only the old lady from the welfare department comes by, and only to chant prayers for my soul. Ha! As if I'd be happy about going off into the next world."

The Hunter said he was busy and had to be on his way, but the old man caught hold of the belt of his coat and wouldn't let go. That was partly the reason D took a seat on the patch-covered sofa, but he also wanted to find out about something else.

"Seems it's been about ten years since you came to the village, hasn't it?" D asked.

"Oh, you're right about that. I can tell you all about anything that's happened since, right down to whose cat's screwing whose."

"Have people been going missing over the last decade or more?"

“How’d you know that, young fella? The village worries merchants and sightseers might stop coming, so they keep it pretty hush-hush, but just between you and me, lately about eighteen people a year have disappeared.” Most of them were traveling merchants, he said, but every year or two one of the villagers would also vanish. Age or sex didn’t seem to matter; in one case it was a farmer’s daughter who’d just turned three, and in another the eighty-year-old man who looked after the water wheel. “This is a hard life,” Roskingpan continued. “Most folks say they probably ran off or got taken by some supernatural critter.”

“Didn’t they?”

“Hell, I don’t know. This is the Frontier. Nothing should come as any surprise. The most surprising thing of all is how anybody stays alive.” Belting back the whiskey he’d poured himself, the old man stared at D. “Why does that interest you?”

“When we went to the Black Death’s encampment about thirty miles south of here, there were a lot of human bones buried out there.”

“I’ll be damned!”

“From what I saw, the oldest were from about ten years ago, the most recent from last year. There were marks on them from being cut with a blade.”

Those must’ve been the same skulls that’d been thrown down in front of Toma and his men.

“So, what’s that supposed to mean? Whoever killed ’em buried all their bodies in one place? Wait a second!” Fixing his eyes on the sky as if tracing back through his memories, the old man quickly slapped both hands down on the table and said, “I’ve got it! You said this was thirty miles to the south, right? I know that a weird farmer and his wife lived out there.”

D could recall the farmhouse that’d stood where the Black Death gang had made their encampment for the night. Along with the outlaws’ ammunition, it’d gone up in smoke.

“They settled in there right about the time the disappearances started. I remember being surprised when one year, all of a sudden there’s this house standing out in the middle of that wasteland.”

“Didn’t anyone get suspicious?”

“Well, I guess they looked into it. I didn’t go, but the mayor at the time sent a party to check it out. They went over that farmhouse real good, but it seems they didn’t turn up anything. Anyway, it was thirty miles from here. Those people never came into town, and I didn’t even remember ’em until you mentioned it just now. The rest of the village probably doesn’t remember ’em either. But there was a pile of bones near there, you say. You figure it was them?”

“Couldn’t grow much in the way of crops out there,” D said. “It’d be impossible for a couple to support themselves. What do you think they fed on?”

The old man's pupils shrank down to pinpricks.

D continued, "Some folks like to live way off from civilization. But there are only two types that choose to live where no one else could."

"Nobles . . ." the old man said, staring at D.

"That, or else pseudo Nobles."

"Then you think that couple came into town and got all those . . ."

"If anyone had suspected anything like that, the villagers would've gone out there and torched the place."

The old man didn't know what to say.

"When someone's fallen under the influence of the Nobility, either as the genuine article or as a fake, their goal is to drink blood. But those remains were the victims of someone who *enjoys* killing."

The old man stiffened, as if something were creeping up the nape of his neck. When the sensation was gone, he said, "Then what you're saying is this: there's a murderer in the village, and pseudo Nobles were living thirty miles to the south? Oh, gimme a break! What the hell kind of place are we living in? I need me a drink!"

D watched the man patiently as he loudly rattled a glass and a bottle of booze. Emptying the tumbler he'd filled to the rim in one shot, the old man let out a long sigh. Wiping his lips with the back of his hand, he said, "You know, I still don't get it. Are you telling me it's a coincidence that there was a murderer in town who dumped the bodies out by that farmhouse? I don't think the culprit would need to haul 'em thirty miles."

"You're right."

The old man shrugged his shoulders.

D dealt the coup de grâce. "Pseudo Nobles don't grow crops for food. And a murderer has no need for dismembered corpses. Or the blood they spill."

After a few seconds, the old man made a ridiculous face. "So, he brought the blood of the folks he killed out to the couple . . . and had 'em get rid of the bodies?"

"The killer might've gotten something else out of it as well. Thirty miles each way is a hell of a trip just to dump a corpse. Maybe he got some way to get close to his victims without anyone noticing him. Even fake Nobles can use a kind of hypnosis."

"I see. That way, he could take somebody's kid right before their very eyes, and they wouldn't even know it." The old man looked terribly weary. He asked in a fuzzy voice, "What became of that couple?"

"Their house was blown away. Before that, they'd probably been put down by the Black Death."

"If so, that'd be one thing taken care of, eh? To think we had freaks like that living just thirty miles from here for a decade!" Some of the tension drained from Roskingpan, but then he said, "Wait a second. That means the village—"

“The village still has a murderer on the loose.”

“Heaven help us. Hey, you’ve gotta find him!”

“My job is handling the Black Death.”

“Does the sheriff know about this?”

“Not yet.”

“What are you doing, then? You’ve gotta let him know as soon as you can. Off with you, now!”

“Actually, I’ve got urgent business.”

“Why, you—okay, I’ll go do it myself!” Running for the door like his life depended on it, the old man stopped halfway there and turned. “And don’t be taking my cabbage!” he said, just to be on the safe side.

II

Lyra advanced straight down the darkened road on her steed. As for her destination—she had none. However, from the way she rode, she seemed to be in a hurry.

Gil was now a fiend, and he was somewhere in the village. For all she knew, his glowing eyes were watching her as he followed along behind her, ready to strike. Swimming in the same fear all the villagers felt, Lyra went down the moonlit road. It was a summer night, with chirping insects, the gurgling stream, and moonlight raining down. There was no one covering her. Rust had tried to send backup, but she’d refused. “I’ll thank you to remember I’m a warrior.” And with these words, Lyra had set out in her role as bait.

If she were to just wander aimlessly, Gil would see right through the ruse. That was why Lyra rode as if she had somewhere to be. Almost an hour had passed since she’d set out on horseback for the western fields, the most isolated area within the walls. She wasn’t in a hurry. If Gil were watching, he’d undoubtedly do so for a while to make sure Lyra was really, truly alone. Lyra wanted to slay the enemy within their borders as soon as possible and lighten the load on Rust’s shoulders.

If Gil showed himself, she was quite confident she could put him down. Her sole fear was that she didn’t know what Gil’s unique ability was. Most wandering warriors and mercenaries had an ability—a deadly skill they’d acquired. Out on the monster-strewn Frontier territory, these served as a shield to protect them, a tool with which to earn their daily bread, and a weapon to slay their foes. As a result, they absolutely hated to have anyone else learn what their ability was, and in more than a few cases they’d gotten rid of anyone who found out. Lyra hadn’t seen Gil’s ability in action yet.

If not tonight, Lyra was confident he’d come after her sooner or later. The whole point of Gil hiding there had to be to cause chaos. The most effective means of accomplishing this would be to strike at the core of the opposition. In the case of the village of Geneve, the central figures

would most likely be the mayor, Rust, Lyra herself, and D. In which case, the logical thing to do would be to get rid of those people, starting with the one that was easiest to strike. And Lyra didn't have any backup.

Suddenly, Lyra felt her cheeks flushing. Touching her hand to them, she found them hot. "No, it can't be," she muttered, sounding half-dazed. She'd been thinking of the mayor, Rust—and then D's face had skimmed through her mind.

At that instant, Lyra felt a sharp pain spearing through her right shoulder. *You're kidding me!* she thought as she dove from the saddle into the woods to her right. Guessing the danger of the situation, her cyborg horse galloped off to safety.

The second she circled around behind a thick tree, she heard a sharp impact on the trunk. Embedded in it was a dart just like the one stuck in Lyra's shoulder. Swiftly extracting the first dart, the warrior woman threw it down. She was so angry she could've spit.

Me, of all people, caught thinking about a man . . .

She focused all her senses on locating her opponent. But she didn't catch anything. Her foe was one with the darkness.

"Then I guess I'll just have to flush him out."

Lyra gave her left wrist a squeeze. A black mass about an inch in diameter fell from her sleeve, landing in her hand. Bringing it up to her lips, the warrior woman blew on it lightly—so lightly it seemed she was just exhaling. Like the weightless fluff of a dandelion, the mass rose into the darkness and was lost.

"Hey, little lady!" a voice called down the road to her. She recognized the bass tone. "What was your name again—Lyla? It's Lyla, right?"

Lyra turned her face toward an enormous eastern mountain cedar that towered on the opposite side of the road. "It's Lyra," she said. Her voice seemed to come from the trunk of the cedar. She'd used a kind of ventriloquism that made her voice echo off an object so it seemed to emanate from a different direction. In some cases, it was possible to make it seem like it came from twenty or thirty yards away.

"Oops, sorry about that. But you're such a pretty thing. I never paid attention to much but your face. I'm sure you remember a handsome cuss like me—well, I don't suppose I'm on par with that Hunter, though."

"Oh, and who might you be?" she asked, throwing her voice five yards ahead of her real location.

"Gil, baby! It's Gil! I'm a pretty famous mercenary in the southern Frontier sectors. So, what do you say to us getting reacquainted?"

"Sure thing. You can come out whenever you like. I'll give you a nice, warm welcome."

"That's nice to hear. Okay, how about we both come out at the same time?"

“That works for me.”

“Well, step out onto the road on the count of three. Okay? One, two, three!”

Gil’s colossal form appeared far down the road.

“What’s this?” he shouted, pointing in her direction. “I’m the only one who came out? C’mon out here, you coward!”

“It’s not my fault you’re gullible,” Lyra replied, her fingers occupied by the most delicate work. Though she couldn’t move her right arm much, her left hand would suffice. “Goodbye, fake.”

Focusing all her attention on her left index finger, she moved it just a hair.

Gil’s body suddenly blurred. Both arms snapped down by his sides as if he were standing at attention. At the same time, a terrible scream issued from the mouth of the fearless giant of a man. Lyra’s eyes alone could make out the black gore that gushed from his body as the bright blood that it was. The blood streamed from him in perfectly spaced horizontal and vertical lines, marking him like graph paper.

“Try to move and ‘Lyra’s strings’ will just cut into you all the deeper. This foolproof technique was only used on a certain street in a certain city in a long-vanished land—and the sole surviving master of it started teaching it to me back before I can remember.”

As Gil cried out in agony, his eyes quickly began to give off a red glow.

A slight sadness was seeping into Lyra's heart, unbeknownst to the warrior woman herself. She hadn't had anything against the easygoing mercenary.

"Okay, tell me something. If you do, I'll end this for you quickly. How many of the enemy are in the village, aside from you? Give me the names they're using and where they live," the woman warrior said in a tone so cold, it seemed likely to freeze the warm air of the summer night.

"O . . . kay . . ." Gil said, his fragmented words reaching Lyra's ears. At the peak of his agony, he barely managed to squeeze them out. "I'll talk . . . So . . . gimme . . . a little . . . slack . . ."

The last word trailed off, and the massive form toppled to one side—or it began to, but it stopped at a sixty-degree angle. It was as if he were snared in an invisible net. In fact, his body actually was wrapped in an unseen net of tens of millions of metallic threads.

Lyra worked her index finger.

"Okay, start talking. I loosened it up some for you."

There was no answer. The eyes of the massive figure had rolled back in his head, and his tongue was hanging out. Had she pulled it too tight?

Despite her misgivings, Lyra made no move to step onto the road. She was well aware that Gil had shown himself not out of stupidity, but rather because he was brimming with self-confidence. That wasn't the sort of thing a professional mercenary did.

Once more, she applied force to the threads. Gil's body twitched, but he didn't cry out. Lyra narrowed her eyes. Fresh blood was dripping from Gil's wrist. Though she believed she'd been careful to avoid cutting any arteries, she might've made a mistake.

"Guess I'm still not as good as my teacher," she said. It wouldn't do to kill this man yet. "A vampire dying of blood loss—sounds ridiculous."

For a second, she wanted to see what that would look like, and as this thought shot through her brain, Lyra stepped out from behind the tree. The giant was unarmed. Even if he'd been wearing any weapons, he wouldn't be able to use them, so that made little difference.

"Come to me," she said, hooking her index finger toward herself.

This time, the giant fell over on his side. Shaking the earth when he struck it, he rolled toward her. Who would've thought the lithe beauty that stood there in the moonlight could've accomplished all this with just one finger? Lyra's finger traced a horizontal line, and the gigantic figure halted at her feet. He was eighteen inches from the tips of Lyra's boots—and her finger had also moved exactly eighteen inches.

"Okay, big boy, open those little eyes of yours and talk to yours truly," she said to him, sounding disgusted.

Gil opened his eyes. They were burning red.

Lyra didn't even have time to jump back. She clutched her heart as she dropped to one knee. The reason for this went without saying. Gil

had used his ability—the power to kill with his gaze.

"Now, loosen up this spider web of yours," Gil said gently. The thick tongue that protruded from his lips never stopped moving. It was lapping up the lifeblood streaming down his face. After all, that was the source of limitless power. However, as his tongue slurped, it also bulged out. Lyra hadn't loosened the net; in fact, she'd made it cut into him even deeper. Gray matter was leaking from his head.

"So . . . we're playing chicken . . . are we?" Lyra said, grinning. Now chalk white, her face was covered with beads of sweat. "Well? You feel . . . like talking . . . now?"

Gil's lips contorted. "Don't . . . make me . . . laugh . . . You want me . . . to kiss you . . . don't you? Fake or not . . . being a Noble . . . is pretty sweet."

"It . . . probably . . . is . . ."

"You really . . . want it . . . I bet . . . I should . . . know . . . There are . . . tons of folks . . . who'd like to go . . . from the ones being bit . . . to the ones doing the biting . . . Lots of warriors like you . . . are really . . ."

"I wouldn't have a problem with becoming one," Lyra said, falling flat on her face. Her breath was like a thread dragging across the dark earth. "But a kiss . . . from you . . . doesn't interest me."

A cry to shake the night spilled from Gil's mouth. In that instant, his body broke apart into tens of thousands of pieces. A choking stench of blood swirled through the air in a steaming cloud.

The moon crossed the sky over the motionless field, and before long even the scent of blood dissipated. Around that time, a monster caught the scent of blood and worked its ten legs, drawing closer to the bloodied corpse, but suddenly it squealed and dove into the bushes.

A colossal figure had risen. From what seemed to be the head spilled a strange, thick mockery of a voice. "I . . . win . . . Ly . . . ra . . ."

But what was truly strange was the figure's appearance. While it looked like a human being, the right half of its head was gone, the right arm was missing from the shoulder down, and the left arm had no flesh on the elbow and biceps. These pieces hadn't been hacked off; they had been removed in neat little cubes, and more cubes of flesh continued to fall away. The bloody fragments were of bone and viscera. If the man were to pick them all up and put them back together like a jigsaw puzzle of the human body, he would probably regenerate. Actually, the figure *did* bend over and scoop up the fragments spread across the ground. While he did so, more cubes fell off his body, and bright blood dripped everywhere.

"This is the power of a Noble!"

Apparently some parts of him were regenerating, and his voice was back to normal. The figure—Gil—brought his hands up to his eyes. Both hands lacked fingers, and his face lacked eyes—in fact, his head was missing from the nose up.

"Well, I'll be good as new soon enough . . . See, the retina's forming . . . and the cornea, too . . ."

When his right hand came away, a face that hadn't even had a socket now had a gleaming eye.

"I only need the one to stop your heart. No, I think I've got something better in mind."

Lyra lay there face down, and Gil reached for her back with his right hand. His fingers had grown back down to the second joint, but when he tried to put any strength into them, they dropped off at the knuckles.

"Damn, I guess it can't be helped, then. I'll have to give 'er the *look* after all—"

His eye began to glow with a red and unholy light. Lyra's body twitched faintly in the throes of death.

It was at that very moment that a gunshot was heard in the distant night air. Judging from the time it took to make impact, the shot had come from more than five hundred yards away. A small hole opened in the middle of Gil's brow. His head exploded.

For a few seconds his gigantic form stood still like an angry temple guardian, but before long it collapsed. Palau had recovered from a similar wound, but Gil's heart was already sliced into cubes. His regenerative powers as a pseudo vampire were finally overtaxed. He literally fell to pieces. A small mound of cubes remained in the middle of the road; briefly, a crimson mist rose from it, but it soon scattered in the night breeze.

If the average human stride is thirty-two inches, enough time then passed for a person to cover five hundred yards. As if beckoned by the moonlight, two figures appeared from the same direction Lyra had come, two new players stepping onto the stage of night.

III

Deep in his heart, his blood was racing. *Probably the very blackest blood*, Billy thought to himself. Though he'd considered trying to stop himself, the weight of the sword stuck in the back of his belt wouldn't allow that.

"I'm heading out," he called to Elena through the door to the kitchen, and then from behind him he heard Agnus say, "See you later, Daddy." The boy stood in his pajamas before the open door to his bedroom, rubbing his eyes.

"Did I wake you? Hurry back to bed. I'll be back home again soon."

"Oh, all right," Agnus replied with a yawn, turning. His too-big pajamas had belonged to his elder brother Jed, who'd died two years earlier. The younger boy had always been rather small, but someday these would no longer fit him. But Billy wasn't entirely sure he'd live long enough to see that. The villagers weren't complete idiots.

Elena came out of the kitchen and told him to be careful. Wiping her hands on her apron, she took the doll that hung on the wall by the door and rubbed it over his torso. A prayer for his safe return escaped her dainty lips.

"Why do you have to go out at this hour? There are plenty of other young people in the village," she grumbled as Billy reached for the doorknob.

"Can't be helped. This is no time to be making a fuss about age. We'll be at war soon."

The second he was outside, delight filled him. All foreboding about his fate disappeared without a trace. Who cared about pseudo Nobles or the Black Death gang? A person had to savor the moment.

A campfire burned down the road. People sat around it. People made of flesh he should drive his steel into, people filled with blood he should spill. As he reached back and felt for his blade, he thought that his eyes were probably ablaze with blood-red light, just like a Noble's.

His run had got the alcohol coursing through him, so Roskingpan's speech was slurred, and Rust couldn't quite make out what he was saying, but little by little he pieced together the story of the murderer. Deciding he'd better go talk with D, the lawman was just about to leave his office when two men and a woman brought Lyra in.

"Oh, D—and Codo and Miriam!"

The long rifles they carried made it clear they hunted for a living. Not everyone who lived in the village was a farmer—there was game to be hunted not only in the mountains, but on the plains as well. That's how it was on the Frontier.

A mercenary who happened to be present was dispatched to the medical center, and then the long-haired Codo Graham explained that the woman and a pseudo Noble had apparently taken each other out.

Codo was an excellent huntsman, and although a mere four years had passed since he'd come to the village, his generosity in buying rounds at the bar with his proceeds after taking down a big animal had made him popular. The only problem was he was good looking and only twenty-six years old, and there'd been repeated whispers of him fooling around with some men's wives and daughters.

"The guy'd been chopped into stew meat," Codo continued. "Thanks to our handsome young friend rushing to the scene, we were able to find out who it really was."

At the sound of a gunshot, D had hurried there. Though the report had been faint, it was no doubt loud enough for the young man to catch.

"Gil?"

D nodded in reply to Rust's question. "But it was this girl that finished him off. They say she took him down at a range of five hundred yards."

Rust turned his eyes to the third person—Miriam Sarai, who stood there looking somewhat embarrassed—and then smiled. “Well, that’s not surprising for Miriam. She was born to hunt, and she never misses. I saw her in action on my first day in the village.”

It was a scene from his past that would be difficult to forget. Miriam had stood on the eastern plains with her hunting rifle braced against her shoulder. She hadn’t moved a muscle even as Rust and Lyra approached, and following the muzzle of her weapon, they could find no sign of anything moving out on the vast plain. They stayed there with the strange huntress for thirty minutes, but it was well worth it. With nothing visible for any distance in front of her weapon, it looked as if she fired at a phantom, but when the woman blew into her whistle, a hawklike form flew toward the churning black and silver clouds over the plain, returning before long with a burrow hog the size of a calf clutched in its talons. Judging from its length, Miriam’s gun had a range in excess of two miles.

The physician came immediately from the medical center, declared that Lyra had suffered a minor heart attack, and then helped the mercenary carry her away.

“We’re losing fighting strength,” the hoarse voice jeered faintly, not that anyone else would’ve heard it.

“Sheriff, we just finished our watch on the eastern wall and we’re headed home, but we’re ready to take on a new post immediately if you need us,” Miriam offered. “Just say the word.”

While he appreciated that, Rust told her they were all set at present and that the two of them could head home, sending them on their way with profuse thanks before settling back in his chair with a sigh.

“To be honest, we’re in trouble,” the lawman said, drawing a finger across his neck. “Lyra alone was worth fifty villagers in a fight. We’ll have to rework all our defensive strategies.”

“She’ll be fine by tomorrow.”

“What do you mean?”

“You needn’t worry about her too much. Her heart was about to stop.”

“And you fixed her up, did you?” Rust looked up at D, saying, “I thought you were more than just an average Hunter. Every time I’ve seen you, I’ve turned to ice.”

“Because you’re a pseudo Noble?”

Though the silence seemed to last forever, it was actually broken right away.

“You noticed, did you? When was that?”

“The first time we met.”

“Did I seem as dangerous as all that? I don’t recall ever showing my fangs, and miraculously enough I don’t have fang marks on my neck.”

“Just a hunch,” said the hoarse voice.

“For the love of God, don’t use that voice,” Rust said, waving his hands and grinning wryly. “Do you want to hear the story?”

“Before I do,” D said, turning his eyes toward the door, “could you tell me more about this huntress who can blow someone’s head apart from five hundred yards away on a dark night?”

“That was something else, Miriam,” Codo said to her as they walked down the darkened road.

“All your tutelage really paid off,” Miriam replied, a haggard ring to her voice.

“So, the student has surpassed the master? Well, you’ll get a chance to show what you can do soon enough!”

“Who do I have to shoot?”

“Like a travel hawk soaring across the night sky, like a glow wolf racing across the earth.”

Codo used one hand to tap the weapons on his hip. They were silvery disks about a foot in diameter. Made of metal as thin as a sheet of paper, a stack of a hundred of them was only four inches thick. He carried a stack on either hip, two hundred in all, and he was better at hunting with them than with a rifle.

“First of all—D.”

His right hand flashed into action. Reflecting the light of the moon, the gleaming disk sailed away, returning several seconds later. Catching it with ease, he returned it to his hip, saying, “Next, the sheriff.”

His left hand flashed out.

“And finally, the mayor.”

Two gleams of light vanished, then returned.

“Understood.”

Miriam’s reply was dwarfed by a louder sound. Far off in the distance—in the forest more than a thousand yards away—a colossal bole had toppled.

“I’ve had to wait a long time, but it was worth it. And I even found you again, my little protégé.”

Codo Graham was the last of the Black Death’s sleeper agents.

THE LURKING SHADOW

CHAPTER 8

I

Daybreak came, the enemy didn't, and Lyra remained sleeping. The guards in the watchtower kept silent.

"Looks like we have you to thank for this."

D shook his head at Rust's remark, saying, "It could be they've become something that can't strike by day."

"You can't be serious," Rust replied, allowing his eyes to go wide. He didn't want to know what D meant.

"Not that I know for sure. It's just a hunch."

"And how accurate is that?"

"Never been wrong," said the hoarse voice.

"Oh," Rust said, shrugging his shoulders. "But humans bitten by pseudo vampires only turn into pseudo vampires. They shouldn't have any trouble attacking in broad daylight."

"I'll go find out."

"I couldn't have that. What would we do if they struck while you were gone?"

"You'll think of something."

"Hey!"

"Lyra will be up soon. You two make a good team."

Rust capitulated. "I don't suppose there's much sense in thanking you. Get right back here when you're done."

Shortly after D's departure, Lyra woke up, just as the Hunter had predicted. Rust told her what D had said. Closing her eyes, the warrior woman said, "Just as I was about to black out, he touched his left hand to my chest. Suddenly, it wasn't so bad."

"There might be something to that left hand of his, don't you think?"

Lyra didn't answer, asking instead, "So, what about that girl?"

"She got better," Rust replied. He'd heard from the physician attending Sheryl that the second the huntress's bullet pulverized Gil's head, the girl had awakened from the Noble's sleep. "The wounds on her neck have vanished, and the smell of garlic doesn't bother her. We really caught a break."

"Maybe I should've waited until after she turned into a fake made by a fake before slaying Gil, eh?"

"Hey!" Rust said reproachfully.

Though he couldn't recall ever telling Lyra how he felt about Sheryl, the warrior woman had long since guessed. Her behavior wasn't terribly conspicuous, but anyone who gave it a little thought would realize why the mayor's daughter personally delivered flowers and food to Rust.

Even when she claimed that her father had told her to do it.

"Enough about that," Rust continued. "Last night, I heard the damnedest thing from D and Old Man Roskingpan. Seems we've got a murderer right here in the village."

Surprisingly enough, Lyra wasn't surprised at all. "Yeah, I thought so," she said with resignation.

"You knew about it?"

"When we first came to town, you only checked the case reports for the last two years, but I read them all from the last decade. I also heard villagers talking about disappearances. Now, every village has folks who get fed up with the hardship and take off, but around here a disproportionate number of missing people were merchants and travelers who were just passing through. Kill someone from the village, and they'll do a thorough investigation, but they don't do the same in the case of outsiders. Really, no village does."

"But there have been disappearances every year for a decade!"

"It probably goes back even further than that. There just aren't files for it. Besides, missing persons aren't murder cases."

Folding his arms, Rust nodded. Sometimes it helped getting a second opinion. "But if there is a murderer, we can't just sit back. If he lays low while we're fighting the Black Death, that'll be fine, but if he uses the confusion to go on a real killing spree, we're screwed."

"Then we'd better pray that doesn't happen." Climbing out of bed, Lyra started getting her things together.

"Where are you going? Get a little more rest."

"I can't leave you with all the work. Besides, there's something you're forgetting. It's my job to finish you off. I'm not about to leave that to anyone else."

"Hell, I know that."

The warrior woman's stern look was met with a look of equally cold resolve by the sheriff. Apparently it wasn't friendship and trust that bound these two, but death.

When D was five hundred yards from the Black Death's encampment, the hoarse voice groaned, "Well, it's just like you said. The whole place is lousy with an air of the supernatural. It's the aura of real Nobles, too. There are some fakes mixed in there as well. Seems they're up to something."

Opening his left hand, D pointed it toward the encampment.

"Whatever it is, I bet it ain't gonna be pleasant for the village. We could go smash it up, but I've gotta wonder where those clowns got the material for it in the first place."

"Don't you know?"

"Nope," the left hand said flatly. "You mean it was *him*?"

D wound the reins around his left hand.

Leaving his cyborg horse, the Hunter entered some dense brush. His steed would return with one whistle.

There was no indication of anyone around him. The bright, sunlit ground wasn't the world of true Nobles. After entering the brush, D proceeded for about a hundred yards before the echo of wood banging against wood reached his ears.

"They're building something," the hoarse voice said with relish. The parasite had as much courage as its host. "I don't know about this, but if they've got defenses set up, it'll be up ahead. Do you remember? It looks kind of like where *he* lived."

It was unclear how D took these remarks, but his gait never faltered.

Suddenly, a shadow moved across the sun. Or rather, his surroundings were unexpectedly plunged into darkness, like sundown on a winter's day. Such a sudden, drastic change in the weather was impossible. The density of the darkness, its physical and temporal characteristics were all that of the night itself.

"Oh, here we go!" the left hand laughed with pleasure. "Watch it. Someone else is coming!"

They came out suddenly. About twenty yards ahead of the Hunter, the ground bulged and five figures rose up, covered with clods of dirt. D recognized their faces. They were members of the Black Death gang he'd cut down two nights earlier.

"These clowns have been bitten by the real thing. Good luck."

D knew that, too. The way they held their swords and spears was different, as was the eerie aura that wafted from them. What stood there wasn't fearless beasts that'd tear into their prey and chew it up, but rather demons who wanted nothing more than to bite through flesh and bone and drink every last drop of their victims' blood.

"D?" one of them asked. The other four lined up to either side of him, fanning out in a crescent around the Hunter.

At that instant, D's battle began. As the figure in black kicked off the ground, his left hand flashed into action. The man on the left tip of the crescent managed to stop a rough wooden needle that was zipping toward his heart, but a second one went through his hand, jabbed into his chest, and protruded from his back.

That was how D started the fight, without even replying to the cries of his opponents. Making not a sound as he dashed forward, he drew his glittering blade, and bright blood gushed out with the first strike. The figure who stood before him was definitely a man he'd dealt death to that night. When D's blade passed through his neck, the man put both hands on top of his head, pushing it back down against the cut. The vermilion line disappeared.

The man laughed without making a sound. "We're no longer what we used to be. We're the chosen ones, given new life by the Great One.

And with that life, D, comes power!"

Long spears cut through the air from either side. Hearing only the sound of them whistling through the wind, D lashed out with his flashing steel. The spears he'd supposedly knocked down collided in midair, zipping at D once more from impossible angles. As the Hunter batted both of them down, his side was pierced by an iron arrow that came flying from his right. Now off balance, his body was the target of more spears and arrows, but D deflected them all.

"It's just as the Great One said. You're good. But when fighting those who possess the same power, four are stronger than one! Your sword can't reach us, and it keeps our weapons from doing any good. All that remains is pure power."

A knowing laugh spilled from the mouth of the man whose throat had been cut. It became a chorus. The men around him were laughing, too. Little by little, their voices changed—becoming something inhuman. Beastly howls rocked the night.

"Die, D! You're prey for the wolf!"

The men no longer retained human form. They had joined to become an object like an enormous, wriggling mass of clay, colored the same hue as the darkness. Part of the mass opened, and the instant a titanic, beastly head shot from it, it was split in two by an oncoming slash of D's blade. Sliced down the middle, the face melted together again, closing around D's head and the left side of his chest. There was a terrible sound. Once more the red maw opened and the beast swallowed the rest of D. Chewing noises could be heard in the darkness. They were followed by an explosion of mocking laughter.

"What an easy battle! So, this is the power of the Great One? Is this the strength of a true Noble? This is wonderful, truly wonderful!"

Four men stood in the darkness.

"The man they called D was a gnat. Well, that's all finished. Let's get some sleep. We'll leave the work of smashing down those feeble village walls to the slaves."

The four of them went over to the spot where they'd burst from the ground. Their eardrums then trembled from a laugh. There was something so unsettling about it—it made even the true vampires they'd become freeze right to the core.

"Heh, heh, heh," it chortled. "You punks think getting a little pity blood from a Noble gives you the right to call a Hunter who's slain thousands of Nobles a gnat? Playtime's over, kiddies. Now it's time for hunting!"

As the men stood rooted in disbelief, one of their heads burst apart like a pomegranate. The arm in black that poked from it was covered with blood and liquefied brains.

Is that D?

Even though the remaining men realized it was, they were powerless

to do anything. Another man's head exploded, and a right hand appeared, gripping a sword. From the head of the third came a traveler's hat and an inhumanly gorgeous face.

"This is how a vampire fights!" D's left hand laughed aloud.

With fear on his face, the fourth one spun around. It was the same man who'd pushed his head back together. Behind him, the bodies of the other three tottered, holding each other up. Flesh split, and bones snapped.

The sword flew from the hand that'd appeared. Spinning horizontally, the blade took the fleeing man through the back of the neck. Once again, the man held his head down, and the line of the cut vanished.

Turning, the man shouted, "You're wasting your time. I'm—"

"—one of the chosen?" the hoarse voice sneered.

The man tripped over his own feet. It wasn't that the hoarse voice had scared him. The vermilion line around his neck had returned, and bright blood had gushed from it all at once. A bloody mist enveloped his upper body—and no sooner did it, than the man dropped his head. Accompanying it were the arms that held it, taken off at the elbows.

As the sword came spinning back, D caught it with his left hand. His body, which could only be described as exquisite, had already regenerated completely, and the other three men had been reduced to some unknown viscous substance that spread around his feet. By the time he sheathed his sword on his back, the world had a stark glow to it —the night had faded, and day had returned.

"Revenge in the sunlight—is that what you wanted?" the hoarse voice inquired. It sounded mocking and amused.

There was no reply. Seeming to have no feeling about this battlefield that'd spawned five corpses in such a short time, the figure in black started forward once again.

II

The huntress had just finished putting a hundred rounds of fifty-caliber ammunition into bandoliers and another thousand replacement rounds in a tin box when the sheriff stopped by.

"Oh, to what do I owe this visit?" Miriam inquired somewhat cautiously.

"I came to thank you," Rust said after taking a sip of the coin tea she'd offered him.

"You sure you should be wasting time like this?" the sharp-tongued Miriam asked. Clearly she found this a nuisance.

"Don't be like that. I'll be on my way soon. I just came to say thanks —and to ask a favor of you."

"I'm not gonna sleep with you."

Rust laughed. “That hadn’t even crossed my mind. Maybe next time.” Eyeing the rifle that Miriam had leaning close at hand, he ventured, “Would you go up in the watchtower as a sniper for us?”

“Got anyone else for the job?”

“We do, but they’re not in your class. You could probably pick off the opposition’s whole front line while they were still a thousand yards off.”

“I could do it at two miles.”

“So, you’ll do it, then?”

“Sure.”

“I really appreciate it.”

Watching Rust as he bowed to her, she said, “For someone who’s not even from around here, you sure are going all out for this village.”

“It’s my job. That’s what I’m paid for.”

“To defend something that’s not worth defending?”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. See you,” she replied curtly, seeming like an entirely different person as she showed him to the door.

Rust seemed slightly wounded as he said, “This might be none of my business, but isn’t it about time you stopped living alone like this?”

The huntress said nothing.

“You know the Schaunepps who live out by the west woods, right? Their boy turns eighteen this year. Seems he’s been sweet on you for some time.”

“Don’t do me any favors!”

“Don’t be like that. Having a man be in love with you is pretty nice. Just think it over.”

Once Rust had left, Codo appeared from the bedroom doorway. “The sheriff sure likes getting mixed up in people’s affairs. That could be a pretty good offer. Why don’t you take them up on it?”

“Even though they’re all going to die?”

Codo smiled cruelly. Placing a hand on Miriam’s shoulder, he said, “You’re going with me.”

“The hell I am!” Miriam snapped, roughly tossing her shoulder to knock the man’s hand from it. “Once your buddies wipe this shithole of a village off the map, I’m heading out of here. I’ll go up in the mountains and hunt for a living.”

“And live just like your parents? Well, you can’t fight your breeding.”

Miriam’s hand shot out with lightning speed. When Codo went for the silver disks on his hips, the muzzle of her fifty-caliber rifle pressed against his forehead.

“The deal was you’re never to talk about my parents.”

“You were born in the western Frontier sector,” Codo said, not seeming at all frightened. “And you only lived with your parents for five

years. They said they hunted for a living. Your parents were good to you."

Miriam's finger cocked the hammer. There was a loud *click*.

"But one day, a posse came looking for the thieves who'd hit a transport plane, and making no bones about it, they shot your parents dead right before your eyes. Your father had shot that transport down from an altitude of more than sixteen thousand feet with an old-fashioned rifle, and then looted it."

"I'll shoot!" Miriam said, the finger she had wrapped around the trigger turning white.

"Your father was guilty, but your mother hadn't known anything about it. And the posse violated you, all of five years old, before they left."

Nothing from Miriam.

"You left the house and headed into the mountains. All you brought with you was a gun and ammunition. You intended to work on your marksmanship, and then take your revenge on the posse. But you forgot to bring along food. If we hadn't saved you, you'd have starved to death. Until the age of ten you practiced shooting with us, and you got damned good at it. Who'd have thought you were such a little ingrate you'd take off without leaving us so much as a note?"

"And write what? *Thanks for taking turns on me each and every night*?"

"That was unfortunate. So, then you went out and tracked down your parents' killers and gunned them down. Since you nailed them from a thousand yards off, they never even knew who did it. And then you learned that the last of them lived in this very village. But unfortunately, he was missing. You must've decided to settle here to wait for him to come back. When I got here four years ago to establish my cover, I'm surprised you didn't plug me."

"It was because you were the only one out of the whole Black Death gang who never laid a hand on me."

"Looks like how we live from day to day can make all the difference, eh? But seeing you like this now, it kind of makes me want to—"

A thunderous report shook the room. In the cloud of smoke, Codo put his hand to his right temple. His hair was singed in a straight line. A black hole loomed in the wall behind him.

"Get out!" Miriam ordered him.

At that moment, a man's cry rang out.

"Did he overhear us?" Codo said. He was just about to dash outside when Miriam stopped him and opened the door.

By the woods across the street, a diminutive figure was fleeing, nearly tripping over its own feet in the process.

"It's Old Man Roskingpan!" she said.

"Are you gonna kill him?"

"No, I'll pass."

"Okay, I'll go, then. Stay out of my way."

As soon as Codo had raced out, Miriam shut the door and returned to the table. Grabbing the bolt handle of her rifle, she slid it back and put in a fresh fifty-caliber round.

She'd had no real need nor any intention of listening to what Codo said. So, in a manner of speaking, it could be said that she had accepted his assignment. When Codo had appeared, a phantom from her past she didn't want to see, she hadn't considered their meeting as fate. Miriam's psyche was filled with the bloody death throes of those she'd killed while avenging her parents. Everything else was just phantoms to her. If she couldn't conclude her revenge, she didn't care who she shot. If Rust or the mayor asked her to shoot Codo, she'd probably pull the trigger without hesitation.

"The sheriff, the mayor, and the warrior woman—that's bound to be trouble."

The way she said these words, it sounded like she was referring to more than just how formidable they were.

I should be okay now, the old man thought. His back was to a colossal tree, and he couldn't hear any footsteps in pursuit.

He'd headed over to Miriam's to invite her to join him for a drink. Not even Roskingpan knew whether or not he, an old man who lived alone, was really a friend of the huntress who guarded her solitude, but they were drinking cronies nonetheless. However, when he'd arrived at her house, he'd heard a man's voice. He was curious and decided to listen for a while. The old man couldn't make out much, as he'd grown a bit hard of hearing the past few years. It all seemed pretty ridiculous to him, and he was just about to head home when he heard a gunshot. Suddenly, he was assailed by a savage feeling radiating from within the house that made him cry out. His instincts as a Frontier native told him to flee, so he'd jumped into the woods.

He halted—not because he thought he was safe, but because he was out of breath. Silently, he dropped to the ground. A breeze skimmed over his head, and the old man saw a silvery disk flying above. It carved into an enormous tree some fifteen to twenty feet away, and suddenly the tree's thick trunk yawned open, sliced clean through. Almost as if it had eyes, the tree fell toward the old man.

Covering his head, Roskingpan rolled into a ball. One misstep while trying to run away and he could impale himself on a branch and be killed instantly, assuming he didn't get pinned under the trunk. There was a terrific thud as it struck the ground. Five-lobed leaves slapped the earth in front of him.

"Where do you think you're going, old man?" a voice called down to him. Codo Graham stood at one end of the fallen tree. Silver disks dangled from his hands.

"I-I-I was just gonna have me a drink out in the woods," the old man sputtered. "You the one that took this tree down? That was mighty impertinent. I'm gonna tell Ranger Patou on you!"

"It wouldn't do to have you telling people *other things*. Old-timer, you hear pretty well, don't you?"

"Don't be daft. What'd you say just now?"

"Well, not that it matters. Just consider yourself unlucky."

"Oh, hell!" Tossing the bottle he carried at the man, Roskingpan madly scrambled to his feet.

"You don't leave me any choice." Codo flicked the disks he held with his fingers. With a whirring sound they flew into the woods to either side of them and slashed through two enormous trees, which fell with a sound like the beating of a giant eagle's wings. As if by design, the two trees had fallen to either side of the old man, only about a foot and a half from him. His scream was swallowed by their crash.

Roskingpan couldn't run anymore. The impact had robbed him of all his nerve. "Ohmygodohmygodohmygod," he cried. One of his neighbors, a man he knew well, suddenly seemed to have transformed into a homicidal fiend.

"Okay, old-timer. See you in the next life!"

The disk spinning on the tip of Codo's index finger rose weightlessly into the air. It approached the old man with a speed that seemed almost leisurely.

The wind whistled. The instant that the sound struck it, the disk was deflected with a lovely *ting!*

Stunned, Codo turned around. From the trees to his rear came the rumble of an approaching engine. Though he couldn't see anyone, he had to wonder who could've shot down his deadly disks. Codo looked at his feet. An iron arrow was stuck in the fallen tree.

"The *sheriff*?"

III

The night stretched on. A strange activity was being conducted at a fevered pitch. Actually, it would've been more correct to call it an *assembly* rather than an activity. The object being constructed, resembling both a gigantic tank and an armored car, was made entirely of wood. Boards as broad as the stones of a building's foundation, beams ten feet wide and sixty feet long, and logs twice as big as a man could reach around were fitted together to form a bizarre vehicle. There wasn't a single nail or bolt in the whole thing.

The assembling was done by six figures. From time to time, they looked down at the ground. Red circles, dots, lines, and rays had been etched all over the black soil. Standing on the drawings, the figures grabbed boards that looked like they were for constructing a house for a

giant. And then they moved their upper bodies as if striking a pose, easily lifting the massive boards into place and securing them, fixing the logs together as if they were enormous pairs of chopsticks wielded by some god in the heavens, and combining the respective materials. This bizarre labor didn't seem like something even those who'd been given the blood of a genuine vampire could achieve.

From the brush about twenty yards away, D watched them conclude their work. Once the last piece had been fitted into a groove, the six figures leapt onto their creation. Lacking wheels or tank treads, the vehicle crushed its way across the grass nonetheless and sped off.

D came out of the bushes. He rapidly closed the gap. His eyes and handsome features showed no murderous intent as he gazed at the scene before him.

"Wait," he heard a voice say. It came from the sky.

D turned around. Something enormous loomed before him, deeper than the darkness. It was clearly a giant. D could make out boots the size of a house, firm ankles, and muscular calves. The kneecaps and thighs that should've been above this were one with the darkness of the distant void.

D! it called out. *It's been a long time since I saw you last. No, strike that. After all, time means nothing to us, doesn't it?*

What are you doing? D called back. *What are you up to out here? Is this another one of those "experiments" you like so much?*

The titanic figure chuckled. It was a laugh that would shake mountains. *Perhaps. You are my only success. I find that sad.*

So, you gave those guys your power?

Yes, that plus "the night." They're stronger than you are, at present. Leave without engaging them.

That's fine, D replied. *As long as you're destroyed along with me*.

So long as light expels darkness, I won't leave this place. So long as darkness threatens the light, you can't go anywhere.

D took the rough wooden needle he'd pulled out and threw it overhead. It rose like a shooting star in reverse, vanishing from sight. In no time, the giant shuddered. His cry of pain was like the ancient winds gusting down from the mountains in winter. Before D could draw his blade, the giant backed away.

D sprang. The colossus wore a jacket the color of darkness. His chest jutted out like a massive crag, and D made another bound off of it. The hem of his coat spread. It fanned out like the black wings of a bat, flapping only once. D continued his ascent. A powerful jaw came into view. The lips looked like crudely hewn gravestones. Above a repulsive hooked nose, narrow slits of eyes ran off to either side. The dark irises and pupils had a luster like crystal, reflecting the gorgeous young man who'd come on the attack.

The altitude was ten thousand feet. Night spread in all directions up

here as well. The giant's hair rippled like waves, and D swung his sword low in the center of it.

Suddenly, D was enveloped by complete tranquility.

"You've gotten better," the voice said with satisfaction. "However, you can't slay me yet. Until you can, your journey is likely to continue."

D was standing on the ground. The sunlight cast his long shadow across the earth.

"So, it really was *him*," the left hand groaned. "It's daylight here. But those clowns can walk around as they like in the manufactured night."

D turned around, as if rejecting the daylight that suited him and the situation so poorly.

"Freeze, Codo!" Rust called from his skeleton vehicle. The sight that greeted the lawman said everything. "So, you're a spy?"

"I'm surprised you figured it out," Codo said with admiration.

"Well, I heard the rifle go off."

"The rifle?" Codo said, his voice rising with the question. "You heard *that*? That was inside the house, and a good while after you'd left!"

"It doesn't matter. At any rate, I need you to come with me to my office."

"Try and make me!" Codo spat, this seeming to be the thing to say, and he swept his right hand out without turning around. Even if the footwide disk didn't strike the target, the eighteen-inch blades that sprang out on all four sides would allow it to cut through an enormous, ten-foot-thick tree trunk.

Rust met it with his short bow. The two arrows that flew from it rose and dove, bearing down on the disk they were meant to destroy. The disk turned up at a right angle. As it went from flying perfectly horizontally to vertically, the two arrows zipped right past it. However, the arrows changed direction and gave chase, and the disk swerved far off course, cutting through a gigantic tree to the left. Trees fell one after another, the crashes pitching all three men into the air.

Trying to avoid a colossal tree trunk about to fall in front of him, Rust cut the steering wheel hard. Disks flew at him. There wasn't enough time to get off an arrow. Rust's life now depended on his skill behind the wheel.

The disks spread their deadly wings. Kicking up dark soil, the vehicle spun around. One of the disks was deflected, but a second zipped toward Rust's shoulder.

From Codo's position, he couldn't tell whether his attack had succeeded or not. This caused him a moment's hesitation in dealing the final blow.

Two black arrows streaked out, rising vertically from behind the fallen tree.

The stunned Codo cursed, taking cover behind another huge tree, but the second he did, one of the arrows burst through the trunk to pierce his lung, while the other scored a direct hit on his heart with a loud *clang!*

"There's such force behind these arrows—you . . . no, you couldn't be!" Codo said, raising high the disk he'd barely managed to hold out as a shield. As blood flooded his lung, he swung his weapon down. With that one chop he lopped off the arrow poking from his chest. The reason he didn't pull the arrow out was because he feared the resulting blood loss. As Codo ran off between the trees, his gait was somewhat unsteady,

but still rather swift.

Instead of firing a third arrow, Rust went in search of Old Man Roskingpan. His right arm was as red as if it'd been immersed in a sea of blood. Rust kept strong pressure on the jagged wound. Codo's disk had taken its toll.

The old man lay flat on his back among the fallen trees, which looked like a pile of beams from an old mansion or castle. He'd hit his back hard.

On guard all the while for an attack by Codo, Rust carried the howling old man on his back as he continued on foot toward the nearest house—Miriam's. His arm had already healed.

Fortunately, Miriam was home, and Rust asked her to boil some water to warm the old man's aching back, at which point Roskingpan finally settled down. The sheriff told her what Codo was, and urged her to be careful.

"I'll go with you," Miriam said, grabbing her gun and a leather satchel of ammunition. From the back room, her great eagle took to the sky.

Once Miriam and Roskingpan were in his skeleton vehicle, the sheriff started the engine. Overhead, the great eagle wheeled in circles.

"If we gave them what they wanted, couldn't this all be over without anyone dying?" Miriam inquired.

"No, what the pseudo Noble wants isn't goods or even blood." Turning to Miriam with an odd look on his face, Rust continued, "What he wants is slaughter itself. See, the means *are* the end. He wants to kill —that's all there is to it."

"You sure know a lot about it, don't you?"

"Well, there's a reason for that."

"What's that?"

"It's nothing. At any rate, I'm going to protect these people. That's enough to satisfy me." After this, the lawman said no more.

They'd gone another five or six hundred yards when a horse came galloping toward them from up ahead. It was one of the mercenaries. Leaning over from the saddle, he said, "The enemy's coming, it seems."

"It seems?"

"Hell, I don't really know myself. From the watchtower I saw a black darkness only about six miles off, and it was coming this way. You wouldn't believe the speed of it. Why, it's like the night itself!"

Quickly scooping up the old man, Rust set him on the back of the man's horse, saying, "We'll go on ahead. You take Roskingpan back to his house."

The sunlight shining down on the group suddenly dimmed.

THE BATTLE BETWEEN NIGHT AND DAY

CHAPTER 9

I

T he glow of the sun had been lacquered over with darkness. The warmth of summer was frosted over by the chill of winter. Day was being overrun by night.

The creatures of the night were there as well. When they'd closed to within five hundred yards, the village began their attack. Old-fashioned, large-bore beam cannons and antitank guns spat fire. They were followed by catapults. Using Monk dynamics and the principles of Tandes-B engineering, the catapults hurled stones that struck with the same destructive power as their own weight in high explosives. Craters formed in the ground around the bizarre approaching vehicle, and ballooning fireballs tossed thick clods of dirt into the air. Crimson beams made the ground boil as they came closer and closer, finally striking the vehicle. On seeing how its wooden sides reflected their beams, the villagers were terrified. It didn't seem that some sort of protective treatment had been applied to the wood; rather, the boards had been assembled in a way that repelled all attacks.

Advancing toward the main gates unhindered, the vehicle halted ten yards away and extended a stairlike plank. Six black figures whipped up a wind of the same hue as they charged across it to the top of the walls. The villagers waiting there greeted them with gunfire, but the bullet holes closed instantaneously. It was like shooting into clay.

Swords gleaming, the mercenaries went on the attack. The shadowy figures seemed to be waiting for the mercenaries' blades to take off their heads and pierce their hearts. Picking up the heads and pressing them back against the gaping wounds, figures grinned wickedly. Like an enchanted blade, a chop from the side of their hands split the mercenaries' bodies open, going through the shields and longswords they raised in defense as if they were paper.

Some of the shadowy figures were also armed. Their automatic weapons and the villagers' rifles spat fire simultaneously, sending both sides flying, but the shadowy figures alone got up again.

"These ain't ordinary fakes!" one of the mercenaries cried. That pretty much summed it up.

Sweeping away the resistance on top of the walls in the blink of an eye, the shadowy figures forced their way into the village. On the road up the hill to the town hall, the mercenaries had lined up twenty-millimeter autocannons. Not seeming in any particular rush, three of the figures came toward them, where they encountered the concentrated

fire of enormous slugs that could blow a body to pieces with one shot. Ridiculously large casings rained down on the road, clinking as they struck each other. The rounds gouged perfectly circular holes through the chests and faces of the figures, bursting out the other side. Any villagers behind them who'd forgotten to hit the deck were torn to ribbons by stray shots.

"So, will this line falter like a candle in the wind, too?" the mayor mused, pursing his lips as he surveyed the situation from the window of the conference room. His tone was composed.

Sheryl and Odama were with him, and they exchanged glances. Though each clutched a small handgun, their faces were as pale as corpses. Their teeth chattered. Odama didn't even have a nose.

Turning toward the door, the mayor said, "The group at the autocannons has been slain, too. Their throats were torn open and they were drained of their blood. Can you manage all by yourself?"

"This situation," Lyra told him, a grin rising to her lips, "I wouldn't even call it dangerous. Well, I'm heading out on the offensive."

"But they're not like pseudo Nobles! They come back to life even after being run through the heart—or losing their heads."

"Then I'll just have to take both away." And with that cryptic remark, Lyra vanished through the doorway.

The trio of invaders accepted the blessings of the night through every inch of their bodies. Energy filled all parts of them, searing each individual cell, and it was never exhausted. They needed to release the energy. This new form of life was blessed, too, in that regard. A ceaseless hunger and craving guided their every action, becoming their raison d'être. All three figures grabbed gunners from the twenty-millimeter autocannons, bit into their throats, and began to guzzle the blood that spilled from them.

Before becoming this way, the bandits had always pictured Nobles coming to a woman in her bedroom or out in the woods and gently sipping the blood, little by little, from her wan throat. Two little holes over the blue veins in her pale flesh would let drops of blood stain her nightgown—but this was nothing like that. A vampire chomped through flesh, tearing open the veins. Slaking the thirst with the massive quantities of lifeblood that gushed forth was the best part of being a vampire. The blood was impossibly sweet and so thick it actually aroused them. And as they drove their fangs time and again into their twitching victims, they grew drunk with the pleasure of slaughter.

At the top of the hill, they could see the town hall, medical center, and community center all clustered together.

"Kill!" one of them declared.

"Drain them dry!" the second one cried, his body quivering.

"Hey," said the third, pointing to a lithe figure standing at the

summit of the hill and looking down at them. Saliva spilled from his mouth as he sensed the purity of the energy that burned in her athletic form, as well as the sweetness and viscosity it would lend the blood flowing through her.

There was no need for words. They dashed for that fresh meat and blood with a speed no track-and-field competitor could match.

Lyra swung both arms out in graceful arcs. This action sent the heads of all three men flying. They didn't even have time to hold them down. The heads went sailing into the square in front of the town hall, where they were impaled on the village flagpole like a shish kebab.

Lyra had told the mayor she was going to take them away.

"Don't throw in the towel just yet. You've been bitten by the real thing, haven't you?"

The decapitated men responded quite vehemently to Lyra's remarks. Noisily spraying blood everywhere, they continued to charge toward the warrior woman. A *twang* ripped through the air. The three chests were slashed diagonally, and they reeled, torsos hanging down their backs. Flesh tore and bone was severed. And amidst this butchery that was almost too much to watch, three bloody lumps shot up into the air with red trailing behind them. At that instant, the trio stopped running and tumbled forward. They were just three feet shy of Lyra.

The warrior woman used both hands to catch the three hearts. Two in her right hand, one in her left. With lifeblood still dripping from them, Lyra pressed them gently against her cheek. "They're still beating. Proof of life? No, even your lives are a sham!"

The three hearts were thrown into the air. On hitting the ground, each split into four pieces.

"Pick 'em up!" someone shouted in the distance. "Hurry and pick 'em up. And then we'll live again!"

Lyra clucked her tongue. There was no need to turn and look. The shouts came from a head impaled on the flagpole. Something started to move down at her feet—a decapitated torso. The upper half flopped over the back of the body, the fingers dug into the earth, and slowly it inched forward. Such a tenacious will to live—or rather, to slaughter and drink blood.

"Die, you fucking monster!" Lyra spat, putting her right hand into her pocket. By the time she grabbed the ring on the little silver capsule she pulled out, the ghastly corpse had reached its heart. With fumbling hands it chose from among the chunks of flesh, forcing the pieces in where its heart belonged. The second she saw the four pieces fuse back together, Lyra hurled the capsule. Ten-thousand-degree flames were more than any victim of the Nobility could stand. They consumed the three bodies and their hearts.

Turning, Lyra looked at the severed heads on the pole. Their eyes bulged as if mortified, their expressions were scowls, but suddenly their

eyes rolled back in their heads, their muscles went slack, and they transformed into swiftly decaying blobs of flesh that slid down the pole.

"This'll work," Lyra said, licking some of the blood the hearts had left on her fingers. It wasn't sweet, and the aftertaste was repulsive. Stopping immediately, the warrior took the road down the hill to join the battle, where she belonged.

II

She arrived at the main gates. The only way to describe the horrible scene was that it was literally a sea of blood. The corpses of countless villagers and mercenaries littered the ground. Some were headless. Missing arms. Upper body gone. Nothing from the waist down.

"Survivors: zero," Lyra said, letting out a faint sigh.

Someone called her name. Right beside the main gates, a young villager lay face down.

"Pete!" she said, running over and grabbing him. She rested his head on her knee. A large chunk had been torn out of his side, exposing his ribs and organs. He was terribly cold to the touch. "Why didn't you hide with the others?" she asked bluntly.

"How could I . . . with you out here fighting . . ."

For the first time, Lyra hated herself. "Who did this to you?"

"The ones that . . . headed for the town hall."

"In that case, I've fixed them for you."

"Really? I just knew it . . . You're awesome . . ."

"You'll be better in no time. Just hang on. Once you're healed, it's back to training!"

"I know . . . Next time . . . it's my turn . . . to save the village."

"That's right. Where'd the other ones go?"

"Toward the school . . . So hurry up . . . and go . . . I'll be . . . fine."

"Can you hold on?"

"I'm okay . . . Don't bother . . . with the doctor."

Lyra nodded. She shed no tears. She wasn't even all that sad. Her chest tightened up a little bit—that was all.

Gently setting the boy down on his side, Lyra got up. A whistle brought her cyborg horse galloping from the top of the hill. Mounting it, she wheeled the steed around. But even as she rode off, she didn't turn to look at the boy.

Once she went through the gates to the school, tension shot through every inch of the warrior. The enemy was already at the center of the field. Watch fires burned in front of the main entrance to the school building, and mercenaries, the Youth Brigade, and teachers were all there with weapons at the ready.

There were three of the enemy. Not advancing, they simply stared at

the defensive line. It was an insidious threat, their way of saying, *We can kill the lot of you whenever we like*.

Flames shot out. One of the villagers had let loose with a flamethrower. The man in the center of the trio carried an oak staff, and the flames struck his chest. He absorbed them, causing the fire to vanish unexpectedly. The villager took aim at his face. Just before the flames made contact, the man snapped his mouth open wide. It was an enormous maw. And the flames were sucked right into it.

Getting down off her horse, Lyra raced over. Choosing one strand each from the masses of thread she had in either hand, she sent them flying at the man in the center. They wound around his body, and then she pulled for all she was worth. She felt the contact. The man should've been quartered and decapitated. But nothing happened.

The man turned around slowly. The instant the glowing red eyes in that black face fixed their stare on her, Lyra halted. *This isn't right*, she thought. What stood there was unlike the pseudo Nobles and true Nobility she'd fought before—a being far greater. And what was far greater about him? His evil. And, oddly enough, his sanctity. Lyra was aware that what stood before her was someone who genuinely deserved to be feared.

Reaching out his right hand, the man made a fist. Though she realized it clutched the threads, Lyra couldn't do anything to stop him. The balls of thread she held vanished, and sharp pains cut into her skin. The threads! She'd been snared in her own threads! An immense power sent her body sailing into the air. Arcing wide, Lyra was slammed against the ground in front of the main entrance to the school. More than the impact, it was the sense of her own flesh splitting that drew a cry of pain from her. She couldn't move a muscle. The threads even had her fingers immobilized.

"Impressive, most impressive!" the man said, his words brimming with very real praise. "Your trick with these strings—I don't know where it comes from, but anyone other than me—even a Noble—would undoubtedly be slain by it."

Even a Noble? What is this guy, then? Lyra thought in despair.

"I have been chosen," the man proclaimed loudly. His words were filled with a joy that couldn't help but move all who heard them—even the people at the entrance to the school. "I am the chosen one. I was given life directly from the Great One. And in it, there was power. Look! Look well. Can you see what that means?"

The man raised the oak staff high with his right hand. Light filled the place. The darkness, the night, had been ripped open. Like vengeful fangs, the light of day focused on the trio of shadowy figures. To either side of the man, his two companions screamed and writhed.

"What are you *doing*?"

"The darkness! Where'd the *darkness* go?"

They ran toward the school as if seeking shelter, but then fell to the ground, overwhelmed. The impact and gravity alone were enough to make the skin of their hands and faces crumble like bits of dried clay. That's what happened even to Nobles. Vampires couldn't live in the light of day. However, this man stood majestically in God's holy light.

"Look! See what I am. The Great One granted me this power. No one knows the real world. Humans don't know the night, and Nobles don't know the day. The Great One and I alone understand the world as it truly is. Would you like to know? If so, I shall teach you. Become like me!"

His voice traveled to every corner of their world, guided by the light. It reached the ears of the people at the school's entrance. It came to the women, children, and elderly gathered in the auditorium. It was heard by people stationed all over the village.

"Well, come on. Is it that hard to come out here in the light? In that case, I'll help you!" The man clapped his hands above his head.

From the far reaches of the earth, night spread over the world like a canopy. People saw stars twinkling overhead.

The man waited a bit. "Still don't feel like doing it? If you do nothing, we'll find and kill every last one of you. You'll be torn to pieces. We'll delight in draining you of your blood. But if you desire to live with me, to learn the truth of the world, to travel across it enjoying slaughter and the drinking of blood, then join me. If you want to create a new world, join me. If you'd like to give life to a new philosophy, join me. What is it that's necessary for creation? Talent? Definitely. Perseverance? Of course. Inspiration? That goes without saying. However, what we truly need is something else: Time. All the talent, perseverance, and inspiration in the world mean nothing without the time for them to take shape. They're just useless theorizing. What good does it do simply talking about the edge of the cosmos? Time, time, time—it's a resource we've dubbed immortality. And if you join me, it shall be given to you."

The man broke off there. He was waiting for their reaction.

"Don't do it!" Lyra shouted as loudly as she could. That one cry sent the steel threads biting into every inch of her body. "Don't listen to him—people were meant to live a limited span. That's why we can change things. But when life merely drags on and on, people don't produce anything."

The steel sliced into her flesh. Lyra writhed, but she didn't cry out.

"Pardon me. I suppose it'd only be fair to let this interloper speak out, too. Very well, then. This is what I shall do: let's see what happens when this woman who protests so loudly is given eternal life. I shall give you all a perfect example." Looking around, he pointed to his two compatriots, who were beginning to return to their feet. "One of you, give this woman the kiss. I don't care which. My power would be wasted

on her. Your fangs will suffice."

Turning their ravaged faces to exchange a look, the two men slowly got up. Both closed on Lyra at the same time.

"Stop!" someone shouted from the school entrance. "We don't wanna be stinking Nobles! Keep your hands off her!"

A machete split open one of the men's heads. He pulled it out and hurled it back, and a villager reeled backward. The machete had struck him in exactly the same spot.

Grabbing Lyra by the shoulder, one of the men jerked her up. The blood dripping from her skin put a red glow in his eyes.

"Don't!" a woman shouted.

It was at precisely that moment that arrows of black iron pierced both men through the heart and eyes. A crunch rang out as the arrows penetrated their skulls. Dropping Lyra, the men staggered wildly.

Right in front of the gate to the field, Rust launched two more arrows at the central figure from the driver's seat of the skeleton vehicle.

Taking hold of the arrows stuck into his forehead and heart, the man effortlessly extracted them. As he pointed them at the two who'd fallen, he said, "They might die that easily, but not me. And now I'll make it so they won't, either."

Grabbing the man on his right by the scruff of the neck, he lifted him. The supernatural air shrouding the men was so intense that Rust could do nothing but watch to see what would happen. It wasn't particularly complex or unique. With a motion that could easily be described as crude, the man bit into his compatriot's neck. Where he made contact, crimson bubbled out, falling in a torrent to the ground. As tranquility returned to the night, there was an incessant gurgle as he wet his parched throat. Unexpectedly, he hurled his compatriot's body to the ground, and the sound shook the people back to their senses.

There was no need to wonder what'd happened. The people watched as his victim got back up. Looking to the heavens and drawing a deep breath, he pulled the arrows from his eyes and heart and threw them to the ground.

The leader laughed scornfully. "This is the power of a true Noble. This is what it means to be a vampire. Do you understand? You must. And know this: this is the only way any of you are going to survive."

"Don't!" cried voices from the main entrance to the school. Several people were jostling. Someone else was heard to say, "Don't you dare go out there!"

The man grinned savagely. White fangs peeked from his lips. It was a smirk of victory.

At his feet, yellow objects trailing flames and black smoke impacted: Missiles from the skeleton vehicle. Windows shattered in the schoolhouse, and the people in front of the main entrance were bowled

over.

The men burned within the flames. Flesh and bone fell from them. And then, in the blink of an eye, they regenerated from the ashes. The man opened his mouth and sucked the flames into it. Once he'd inhaled them all, the man exhaled. Another arrow flew, piercing his companion through the neck.

"You're wasting your time," the leader said, rapping his staff against the field. The ground quaked violently. No sooner had Rust leapt out of his vehicle than it was shaken to pieces. Its destruction was followed by that of the jungle gym and the chin-up bars—all as a result of the shock the man's stick had generated.

Discarding his bow, Rust gripped his arrows as he headed toward the man. The ground continued to quake.

A look of surprise skimmed across the man's face. "If you can run through all this, you must be a—"

Rust jammed an iron arrow into the base of his neck. Not seeming to mind the fact it'd been driven in all the way to the fletching, the man grabbed Rust's hand. Groaning as the man apparently squeezed with all his might, Rust nevertheless took a step forward, forcing the man's joint the other way and throwing him. Landing feet first as if he didn't weigh an ounce, the man raised his right hand.

Rust was just about to take a swing at the leader when something grabbed him. It was the man's compatriot. "I'll drain his blood!" he shouted, slobber flying from his mouth. Crimson lips closed on Rust's throat, but a second later, the man gave a brief cry and doubled backward, the blade of a bastard sword stuck deep in his back. He let go of Rust.

"Take that, you fucking monster!" Old Man Roskingpan said, jumping for joy by the gate to the field. He must've been quite pleased at scoring a hit with such accuracy from fifty yards away.

Not having time to recall how he'd sent the old man home with a mercenary when he'd dispatched Miriam to the main gates of the village on horseback, Rust drove an iron arrow down through the crown of his opponent's head.

"That little bastard," the man growled, ignoring Rust. With the arrow still sticking out of his head, he dashed off toward the old man, who'd wounded him first.

"Oh, shit!" the old man exclaimed, sprinting for the gate to the field. His body—the entire night, for that matter—had been covered with something.

"I was a fool to offer to take you in. Now I'll dispose of the lot of you. To have even considered letting you idiots join the wise, I must still have some of the old me to contend with," the leader howled toward the sky, something dark effacing him completely. It was deeper than even the darkness of night. "I'll show you how a Noble does battle. And then

you'll die slowly."

Rust could no longer see anything. He could only hear the man's voice.

Billy had finally found a prey worthy of all his murderous skill. Though the darkness that imprisoned the world had startled him, it would also conceal his presence. The method was simple. As always, he merely needed to sneak up behind his prey and hack into him with his butcher knife.

The man in black chasing that old-timer—ah, here he comes. I'll hide right behind the gate.

The old man shot by. A few seconds later, so did the other one. Going after them, Billy raised his blade with all his might—and just then, his prey turned around. Fangs gleamed in his mouth.

He's a Noble? Before Billy could strike with his butcher knife, the man bit into his throat. Even as he let out a scream, Billy was surprised that there wasn't much pain at all. It came to him in a flash. *This big idiot's gone and changed me. With one bite to my throat. I'm not wild about the wounds, but there's nothing I can do about that. Now, I can fight this freak on equal terms.*

Billy struck with his blade.

III

The darkness swallowed the people who stood in front of the school's main entrance. It enveloped the group who'd gathered in the auditorium, as well. A baby began crying so loud it seemed like it would shatter the windows. Pet dogs were growling in a low tone.

Rust could sense innumerable things moving around in the darkness. He heard the howls of beasts. Ravenous wolves. Somewhere, there was a woman's scream—followed by the sound of tearing flesh. The fluttering of wings filled the air. Children were crying. Rust felt something against the scruff of his neck. Fangs like slivers of glass gouged his flesh, and the blood that spilled out was devoured. He killed one with his bare hands, but two or three more bit into him and drank. Men and women alike were screaming. *They're drinking my blood!* they cried to the heavens.

Rust leapt for the man he knew should be there. Getting only an armful of air, he landed on his stomach, and then crawled forward. There was the flapping of wings again, and fangs assailed him once more. *It's no use*, he thought. *One man can't win against these fake Nobles.*

Suddenly, things changed. The flapping wings and howling wolves receded like an outgoing tide. Rust saw a new darkness. As did the villagers, male and female, young and old. Darkness swirled with darkness, vying for supremacy, taking on a new form. It was chaotic. The world was chaos.

Then, everyone saw it. There, at the main gates. An inhumanly beautiful figure in black astride a cyborg horse. D.

The man in the darkness was Toma.

Two assassins from the world of night—and here they came face to face.

“Did you make it in time, D?” Toma asked with amusement. “Surely the Great One told you I’m not the same as when you slew me. I’ve been chosen, given the power only *he* possesses. Know that before you come at me.” He said this in a voice of iron, his tone one of firmly rooted confidence.

And what was D’s response? There was only muffled laughter.

“If this babe born just two or three hours ago is the chosen one, he’s the only success,” said a hoarse voice. “This fella here is what you get after taking the chosen ones and doing hundreds of millions of experiments. So, you think as a brat still in diapers, you’re fit to face off against someone so far beyond your level? You’ve already died once, Mister. Have you forgotten so quickly what death’s supposed to mean after your allotted span?”

Toma poised himself for battle, staff in hand. Around him, beasts howled.

D’s eyes glittered weirdly. “Since you’ve been given *his* blood, I can’t let you leave here alive.”

The horse's hooves tore up the ground.

Lowering his center of gravity a bit, Toma prepared to counter.

Up on his steed, D drew his blade. "Have at you!"

As horse and rider charged forward, the darkness pounced on them. It clearly took the form of wolves and bats. D swung his blade twice. It gleamed amidst the pitch blackness. The beastly forms of the darkness were easily cleft in two, and D barreled straight for Toma. With a graceful motion, his silvery blade sank into Toma's head.

Making no attempt to raise his staff, Toma merely took the blow. The line that ran from the top of his head to his jaw vanished as if it'd never been.

"Such is the power of the Great One!" Toma exclaimed, his smile revealing pearly teeth. Making a great leap back, he struck his staff against the earth. The instant the ground quaked, the Hunter's cyborg horse fell to pieces.

D was in the air. His whole body was bathed in white. The night had been split open. Stark, radiant sunlight—the light that drives back the darkness, warms the earth, and gives life to all things—challenged D. Challenged one with the blood of a prince of darkness.

Thrown horribly off balance, he was falling back to earth when the oak staff hurled at him pierced his heart as if he were made of paper. Lying flat on his back, the young man became a gorgeous sculpture of death.

Light, O light! Rain down! For the sake of the deceased, ill suited to thy warmth.

Had such an exquisite corpse been created in a summery light that made everything melt away in a white blur? Ah! And then night once more closed its black velvet canopy.

Toma was down on one knee. The vacant look on his face and the way his shoulders heaved violently spoke volumes about how the strain of this deadly conflict had been more than just physical. After a few seconds he got up again, went over to D, and extracted the oak staff that stuck out of the Hunter like a grave marker.

"This is the conclusion the Great One reached. D, I'll probably be you someday." Turning around, he began to walk away. Not toward the school building, but to the main gates.

Behind him laughter trailed like the thread of his fate. "You'll never be him. Not in a million years!"

Spinning around in amazement, Toma saw it: A darkness spreading before his eyes. A darkness far deeper than what he'd spawned. That darkness was named D.

One darkness swirled around the other, resisting, forming a new darkness. A glowing darkness. A light.

Toma held his staff up over his head. A silvery streak went through it, slicing him from the top of his head all the way down to the crotch. A

bloody mist eddied from the cut. It resembled an explosion. Within that bloody mist, Toma wrapped his arms around himself.

"How can this be?" he asked. "Tell me. Did you not choose me? Or was I just some stupid stone to whet D's blade? Save me, O darkness! Save me!"

No sooner had he finished intoning the words like a prayer than he split in two lengthwise. But all this was shrouded by darkness. Rust didn't see anything. Nor did Lyra or the people at the entrance to the school.

"It's finished," said a voice. A beautiful voice of iron. And if he said it, then it had to be so—it was all over.

A murmur ran through the crowd. Looking down at their feet, people were seeing their own shadows. There was light. The darkness was receding.

There was no sign of D.

Presently, a group led by the sheriff and a blood-soaked Lyra—who leaned on the lawman for support—walked to the entrance to the field, where they discovered the doubled-over corpse of Old Man Roskingpan and a cadaver in the process of decaying. The cadaver had a butcher's knife running through its back and out its chest; the hilt was gripped in the old man's hand. None of the villagers had known the murderer named Billy, but they all knew the old man had been so overwhelmed by losing his wife and child to disaster years earlier that he'd consoled himself by conversing with an unnamed imaginary friend. Whenever he got drunk, he had always blamed the deaths of his wife and child on the villagers who'd been there with them but had run off, thinking only of their own safety.

Pushing aside the rotting remains, someone laid a coat over the old man, saying, "Amazing! This old drunk took down a Noble."

Those words were to become the old man's epitaph.

On reaching the main gates to the village, the group was greeted by the mayor, Sheryl, and Odama. It was nearly dusk. It seemed to have come a little early, likely the result of some debate on the parts of day and night.

"We owe you our thanks," the mayor said, although it was unclear to whom he directed his remark. "Have those wounds tended to right away."

Sheryl's eyes danced with joy. "Tomorrow, life will be back to normal. Let's forget all about what happened today."

But someone said, "Not if I have anything to say about it!"

Everyone turned and looked at the watchtower. Codo stood by the base of it. Though he was stained with blood where Rust's arrow had punctured his lung, he pointed his left hand toward the sheriff. In his right hand he held one of his deadly disks.

“Don’t forget that Nobles, real or fake, are the enemy of every village on the Frontier. I know what I saw, Sheriff. You’re a pseudo—”

The back of his head splattered like an overripe persimmon before the crack of the gunshot reached them.

Rust looked up at the watchtower window, where Miriam was adjusting her grip on her smoking rifle. Out of the corner of his eye, the lawman caught a silvery streak. Codo’s weapon. Rust, still supporting Lyra, was in no position to parry it. The blade bisected his chest. While Codo slumped to the ground, Rust’s body sank slowly. Including Lyra, three bodies hit the earth.

“What in blazes?” the mayor murmured, barely squeaking out the words that said what everyone was thinking.

“A traitor . . . killed the sheriff,” Lyra said as she got up again. “He was a . . . good sheriff, right? Rust Novell . . . That’s the name to carve on his headstone.”

Out of all the people frozen in their tracks like ghosts, only one farmer recalled ever hearing that name. He was a long-retired mercenary.

In a little village in the eastern Frontier, legend had it that the community’s youthful leader had come under the pernicious fangs of the Nobility and been turned into a pseudo vampire. Miraculously, he was able to go on living just as he’d done before. However, when he could no longer bear the stares of the villagers and decided to leave, his parents sent an exceptional warrior woman with him, under contract to slaughter him without mercy when the Noble in him awakened. Or so the story went.

Of course, the farmer said nothing. He knew that the figure of that tale would feature in a new legend as a remarkable sheriff.

The village flag that flew from a pole by the main gates rustled faintly in the wind. The people realized that D had arrived on a cyborg horse.

“Did he get what he wanted?” D asked.

“It was a glorious way to go,” Lyra replied.

“Not yet.”

The people noticed that D was staring at Rust’s corpse. Impossible! The bisected body had fused back together again when they weren’t looking. How could this be? The sheriff who’d died so honorably was getting back up. No! Fangs poked from his mouth, and his eyes burned with a crimson glow.

“This is what I am,” Rust said in a voice that seemed to flow up from the bowels of the earth. “Somebody, stop me. I never knew my own blood . . . could smell so sweet!”

D got off his horse. A pale hand kept him from going any further.

“We have a contract,” Lyra said, slowly moving forward. “Rust,” she called to him. Her tone was so cold it gave chills to those around her,

but also so sorrowful they found themselves weeping in spite of themselves.

The sheriff dove to one side. As he fell, he nocked an arrow, and he let it fly as he splayed across the ground. The instant his shot pierced the bloodied Lyra through the right shoulder, the lawman's body split lengthwise. It was pseudo-Noble instinct that made him reflexively wrap his arms around himself.

Lyra leapt at his chest. When she pushed herself off him, the people saw a black arrow in Rust's heart. After pulling his arrow out, the warrior woman had used it to fulfill her promise.

Without a word, D got back on his steed. "Took that hit on purpose, I think," he said. But it was unclear whether he was referring to the arrow in her shoulder. The dusk breeze tossed his hair.

"It's kind of chilly," someone said.

D rode his horse toward the gates. No one tried to stop him.

"Will I ever see you again?" Lyra asked.

Naturally, there was no reply.

When the hoofbeats from the cyborg horse began to fade in the distance, Sheryl started weeping in the twilight.

THE END

POSTSCRIPT

In this postscript I'd like to talk not about D or my own writing, but to discuss a certain Japanese author. His name is Futarou Yamada. And in the history of Japanese entertainment novels, he stands at the very peak. In my books I've used all kinds of superhumans and supernatural beings, but no matter how dramatic the characters or powers I created, I've never once been entirely satisfied. Once I'm done writing about them, I always think the same thing: *I'm still no match for Futarou Yamada.* I've long since given up hope of ever beating him. Though the desire to at least write something that matches his work drives my pen every day, all that I'm left with is a feeling of defeat with an affectionate smile on my face.

When I was in junior high and high school, Futarou Yamada had a string of massive hits lining the bookstore shelves. It was a series of paperback novels about Japan's unique covert operatives during the Warring States era, depicting ninja using their closely guarded abilities in battle against other ninja—a series called *Futarou ninpouchou*. That was the genesis of the *Vampire Hunter D* series—and of all my novels, actually. The first volume was *Kouga ninpouchou*.

Foreign readers may be familiar with the powerful leader Tokugawa Ieyasu, who founded the Edo period. In this novel, a total of twenty superhuman ninja are chosen to battle to the death to determine who will be the shogun's successor, with half of them from the Kouga clan and the other half from the Iga clan. One can spit out gooey threads like a spider; another can change to any color like a veritable chameleon, disappearing from view. The leaders of the respective factions are a handsome young man and a beautiful young lady, star-crossed lovers like Romeo and Juliet. The man is able to turn any attack back against his opponent with a single glance—sending the swords swung at him slicing into his attackers. And the woman has the power to defeat the special abilities of any ninja she trains her lovely gaze on. What's absolutely perfect is there's a man who's just like a vampire—only he's not. However, vampires are represented by a wild, ageless, undying female ninja who makes an appearance. She can be killed over and over, only to rise again and finish off her opponent when they let their guard down. Another ninja that made an even stronger impression is a beautiful woman who, clearly influenced by Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter," has breath that turns to poison when her passions are inflamed. In other words, one kiss from her can send the recipient to the afterlife. Sounds like an attractive yet terrifying ability.

After reading *Kouga ninpouchou* as a junior-high-school student, I wanted to read more like it, and it didn't take long for that to turn into a desire to write books like this. Though the *Vampire Hunter D* series was

directly sired by the 1958 film *Horror of Dracula*, the foundation for the story lay in *Futarou ninpouchou*. This book, *Scenes from an Unholy War*, is proof of that.

Kouga ninpouchou has been translated into English as *The Kouga Ninja Scrolls*. The *Futarou ninpouchou* series was such a great hit in Japan that there was really no need to sell it overseas—or (perhaps) the historical setting isn't geared toward foreigners—so only the first book has been translated. But I heartily suggest you flip through a copy at least once. No doubt you'll find the universal spirit of entertainment laid out on each and every page. What's more, *The Kouga Ninja Scrolls* has been turned into the manga and anime *Basilisk*, as well as the film *Shinobi: Heart under Blade*.

Hideyuki Kikuchi
June 25, 2012
while watching *Shinobi: Heart under Blade*

And now, a preview of the next book in the
Vampire Hunter D series

Vampire Hunter D

Volume 21

Record of the Blood Battle

Written by
Hideyuki Kikuchi

Illustrations by
Yoshitaka Amano

English translation by
Kevin Leahy

Coming in summer 2014
from Dark Horse Books and Digital Manga Publishing

HEY, BROTHER!

CHAPTER 1

I

Their swords were drawn. Glittering flecks rose into the air, collecting there, waiting for the fateful moment of blood spray. There were five of them. As for their opponent, the blade he should've drawn to counter them remained sheathed in a scabbard shaped like a crescent moon.

"Why don't you draw?" a one-eyed warrior, the apparent leader of the group, asked in a voice fraught with tension. His helmet, pauldrons, gauntlets, greaves, and alloy vest all showed plenty of dings, scorch marks, cracks, and rewelds. He had a hard face that suited his battle-damaged equipment. The electronic eye in his left socket fed his brain hard data that was quite different from what his normal eye took from the figure in black who stood about five yards from him with hands empty.

Look around. The location was an outlying area of the village of Satori in Sector Nine of the northern Frontier—the ruins of Castle Macula. There was a crowd ten or twenty deep comprised of villagers from Satori, as well as the residents of the three neighboring villages of Elk, Tabi, and Fouran, folks who seemed from their style of dress to be instructors, travelers, bargirls, hookers and gigolos, performing-troupe members, gamblers, outlaws, and peddlers of everything from booze and tobacco to medicines, swords and spears, synthetic meat, and motorized equipment, ad infinitum.

Just because this was a Frontier village, that didn't mean they spent all day, every day, shooting and stabbing each other. So when something did happen, everyone in the village locked up their homes and shops and came running. However, there were so many vendors and tradespeople here, it almost seemed as if they'd come days ago and pitched camp there. The proof lay behind the rows of onlookers, where roasted-mushroom vendors more suited to late autumn and dried-fish sellers had set up shops side by side, followed by the always-popular kebob shops, peddlers of Frontier sweets, and a shop selling rainbow-colored beans, their gaudily illustrated tents lining both sides of the broad thoroughfare. It was just like a carnival boardwalk. In fact, among the crowd were children with eyes aglitter as they gnawed on candy sticks, while their fathers sipped syrupy narcotic drinks from paper cups. Though the smaller stalls had only started to set up two days earlier, people had been coming into the village of Satori for the past three days, and the cause of all this commotion traced back to a day earlier than that.

"Draw!" one of the men urged. He was a hulking brute; his arms,

legs, torso, and head all looked like they'd been assembled from enormous meatballs. Everything about him was round and plump, while his head and limbs were devoid of even a single hair. His adversary stood there as still as a shadow that'd taken form on a winter's day, so he was practically begging when he continued, "C'mon, when I tell you to draw, draw already! If you don't, we can't have much of a sword fight."

The man seemed truly in a bind, and his opponent finally responded, saying, "Come at me." His right hand went for his scabbard, and then with a flash of prismatic light, his blade was drawn. More than the beauty of its glint, it was the subtle forcefulness with which the young man raised his arm that shook everyone.

"Son of a bitch!" snarled another of his opponents—a muscular giant of a man who was exactly how you'd expect a warrior to look. He sounded both disgusted and enraged. He had beady little eyes, a broad, flat nose, and terrible buck teeth. "You damn showoff. I'll see to it you get yours!"

His boots made a determined step forward.

"Wait! Let me handle this," said another young man, standing to the right of the first. He was the smallest of the bunch, and his weapon was a bit strange. From the back of his left hand, iron claws projected a foot and a half—he wore what the ninja had called a *tekko-kagi*, or "hand claw." The average sword could cut down about four people before its blade was so coated with blood and fat that it was rendered useless. But with its row of four iron claws, the *tekko-kagi* could use its tips like a raptor's talons to rip a foe open without the fat dulling the effect.

"No, I'll do it," the fat one said.

"No, me. I can't stand pretty boys. You wouldn't believe how many times they've screwed me over," said the bucktoothed warrior, and he evidently meant it.

"Shut up. You geezers keep out of this!" the young man with the *tekko-kagi* shouted, so hard his body quaked, and then he kicked off the ground. An incredible jump sent him in excess of fifteen feet, and he swung his weapon down from overhead. There was an unearthly, mellifluous sound, and then the young man flew back. It almost seemed miraculous, the way he followed exactly the same trajectory and landed back where he'd started the leap.

Cries of astonishment rose from the onlookers, while the warriors looked at each other.

"All of you can come at the same time," the young man said. His voice had become hoarse.

Though his expression twisted with puzzlement for a second, the bald, fat man charged forward, saying, "I'm next!" From the way the bucktoothed warrior muttered, "The bastard's done it again," it seemed the fat man made a habit of stealing others' places in line.

His charge, which made the very ground tremble, seemed little more than the mad rush of a fool.

"Is he an idiot?" the hoarse voice spat, and then the young man in black's blade pierced the fat man's thigh. The thrust felt odd. Though the blade sank into his foe, it didn't feel like it was piercing muscle and fat. It was like jabbing a stick into a wad of rubber cement.

"Aaaaaaaaah!"

The fat man collided with him. From his face all the way down to his knee, the young man in black sank into the doughy flesh. At this point, it wasn't the spectators who gasped in astonishment, but rather the other four warriors. No one had ever withstood the fat man's charge. Merely planting one foot back a little, this young man hadn't even been knocked off balance. However, if he were to remain like this, he was as sure to die of suffocation as an old-timer with a rice cake caught in his throat.

The fat man wrapped his pudgy arms around the young man's back. At the same time, his face turned toward the sky. The young man's left hand had pushed his chin up—and no sooner did the people see that than the massive white form was thrown backward with incredible force. Until he struck the ground within spitting distance of the crowd—having been knocked a good twenty-five feet—the other warriors forgot about launching their next attack.

"All right, now it's my turn!" the bucktoothed man said, flourishing his sword once. His amazement at the young man's strength had changed to delight. It thrilled him to the core to fight such a man.

"Just a moment," someone called out. It was the last of the group—the fifth and final warrior. Framed by a head of red hair that seemed ablaze, her beautifully pale countenance also burned with determination as she gazed at the young man.

Everyone present had to wonder why a woman with looks that'd allow her to lead a charmed life would choose to do this instead. In fact, they'd been pondering that ever since they first laid eyes on her. But now they realized something. She directed an unwavering stream of murderous intent at that inhumanly gorgeous young man. And on neatly drawing her sword, she struck a daunting pose. The woman seemed the most formidable adversary of the bunch.

"Well, I'll be," the hoarse voice rasped appreciatively. "What a surprise! This little lady's tough!"

Extending her sword, the woman slowly raised it to shoulder height. Her left hand was outstretched, fingers curling. No sooner did the people notice that the woman's blade was strangely straight and thin than it flashed out. The woman made a thrust—in fact, she made a dozen simultaneously. All of the silvery flashes appeared to pierce the young man who stood some ten feet away.

However, it was the woman who gasped with surprise. There wasn't

a mark on her target, and she hadn't felt the tip of her sword sinking into flesh. The gorgeous young man in black had moved with an alacrity that surpassed the lovely woman's speed with the sword. What she'd pierced had been an afterimage he left behind. Her willow-thin eyebrows rose in anger, and the murderous intent that billowed from her became an inferno. At that moment, the people realized the woman's destiny. There was only one way this could play out.

The woman advanced.

But a tall figure stepped out in front of her. Their one-eyed leader.

"Out of my way, Mikado," the woman told her colleague in a tone of pure spite.

"Call it a day. You can't take him."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You know exactly what I mean. I won't have any of my people throwing their lives away."

"I'll never know unless I try."

"Delilah," the man said, his good eye reflecting the beautiful woman. Her blazing animosity suddenly vanished. "Watch real closely."

And with that, there was a rasp of steel as the man they called Mikado drew the sword from the scabbard on his hip.

"*Mikado?*" the young man with the hand claw fairly gasped.

And the fat man, finally back on his feet, could only nod absentmindedly. "Mikado drew his blade," he said, his voice shrill.

The world fell silent.

Mikado's blade was low enough to touch the ground, while the young man squared off against him with his sword shoulder high and leveled at his opponent.

"Well, look at that," a hoarse voice was heard to say.

Mikado had begun to shift his sword to a high position. At the same time, his face became as starkly white as paraffin.

Something outrageous was going to happen. Everyone waited with bated breath. The young man didn't move. It was still as a holy winter's night.

Without warning, Mikado lowered his blade. The color instantly returned to his complexion. Streaks of sweat rolled down his cheeks as if by popular consensus.

"I'm not ready to die yet," Mikado creaked, squeezing a voice from his throat that was equally hoarse. It was like the sound of someone spitting up blood—or breathing his last. Turning to his compatriots, who were rooted to the ground in a daze, he said, "That's about the size of it. He's more than we can handle. We're done here."

A relieved murmur went through the crowd of spectators.

Mikado turned to face the young man once more. His opponent had already sheathed his blade and turned his back to the man. "Hold up," he said.

The man in black halted.

"Why didn't you cut us down? You don't seem the sort to let somebody walk away after drawing on you."

The young man began to walk away. Over one broad shoulder, a voice asked, "Why did you come at me one at a time?"

There was no way to describe the expression that wafted across the faces of Mikado and his people.

"Would you at least give us your name?" Mikado asked. "I'm Mikado, and the girl's Delilah. The fatty's Tong, the runt's Enba, and the first guy you dealt with is Galil."

They had their answer soon enough.

"D."

The color drained from the faces of all five. "You're—" one of them started to say. Or perhaps it was all of them. The warriors said no more, merely watching the young man walk away. Though the wind gusted past him, the murderous intent it should've borne had already died out.

II

D didn't stop until he reached the black ten-foot sphere that loomed near the center of the clearing. The lustrous sheen of its surface as it reflected the sunlight told him it was metallic. The stone walls and rounded columns scattered around it, as well as the remnants of a well, made it plain that the whole clearing was the remains of something belonging to the Nobility—the ruins of Castle Macula. Six days earlier, a powerful quake had struck the region, causing extensive damage. The ground had subsided and there'd been a rash of landslides, but the torrential rains five days earlier were the final blow. The mountainside crumbled, muddy torrents coursed over it, and the clearing that at first had been little more than a cramped depression grew to over ten times its former size. And it was four days earlier that a piece of history that'd been kept hidden by those thousands of tons of earth and stone was discovered—the black sphere before the Hunter. That was how it all started.

Twenty-four hours was all it took for word to spread from one member of the town hall's damage-assessment team to the entire village of Satori, and then to travelers and merchants. A remnant from the Nobility in superb condition. Bolstered in part by the object's somehow humorous form, those who worked up enough courage to go over and touch it or bang on it were unharmed, and that only spurred on the commotion. Villagers had swung mattocks and pickaxes at it, and the blacksmith had pitted first an acetylene torch and then a laser cutter against it, but nothing had even scratched the sphere. It could be struck by a hundred-thousand-degree beam one second, yet be cool to the touch a second later, glistening in the sunlight.

It took no time at all for the people's thoughts to go from *What's it made of?* to *What's it for?*—before winding up at *Is there something inside?* And those musings were transformed into a feverish morass of hopes and expectations when a physics instructor from a nearby school had come two days earlier, spending half the day filling the walls and floor of his hotel room with scribbled calculations that ultimately spilled out onto the dirt of the clearing, until the fateful moment when he asserted, "There's something in this sphere!"

Something? Could it be jewels and precious metals belonging to the Nobility, or the key to their ageless and undying nature? Drooling, with bloodshot eyes, the people set about trying to break the sphere open. Some shot at it with guns, while others planted dynamite around it. However, no matter what they tried, they couldn't make this perfect sphere move even a fraction of an inch, despite the appearance that it might roll away at any second. Time merely mocked them with its passing.

There was a reason for their feverish desire. Castles and ruins from the Nobility could easily be found anywhere on the Frontier. The northern Frontier was particularly thick with them, and the artifacts discovered there were purchased either by the government in the Capital or by local dilettantes for considerable sums of money, making communities and individuals quite rich. When signet rings, swords, clothing, sculptures, portraits, and the like could change hands for hundreds of millions of dalas, the village was forced to defend their interests. Ruins within the village bounds would be tightly guarded while surveys were conducted under watchful eyes. However, many of the sites turned out to be nothing more than ruins, and the people soon awoke from their fever to find mere fragments of an ancient dream littering the weedy wasteland.

The matter was simple enough. All the village of Satori had to do was keep possession of the site for four days. But a problem cropped up. The clearing in question was near the boundary between Satori and a neighboring village, in an area that by common agreement neither had laid claim to for the past five centuries. Their neighbors were vehement in their opposition. As the protests grew more violent, Satori decided to ignore their neighbors, who then hired a band of warriors to enforce their claim. At essentially the same time, D came into the employ of the village of Satori. Both sides had drawn their weapons to settle the matter of who owned the strange metallic sphere.

As D stood before it, a couple of men rushed over to him, forcing their way through the heavy crowd. They were public officials from Satori. One wore a tin badge on his chest—the sheriff.

"Nicely done! Our faith in you was justified," said a skinny man with a mustache, rubbing his hands together. He was the mayor. "The sphere is ours now. We ought to throw a museum up around it and spread the

word far and wide. Hey, don't touch it!"

D was resting the palm of his left hand against the gleaming black surface.

"You're out of luck," a hoarse voice sneered.

The person in charge of public relations wore an expression at once angered, startled, and perplexed, for though the voice had most definitely come from D, it seemed inconceivable that it was really his. "Was that you? What exactly do you mean by that?" He intended to drill the Hunter with his questions, but they had no force behind them.

Taking his left hand away from it, D said, "There's someone inside."

The mayor and those around him froze. No doubt they felt as if the whole world had just iced over.

"You're not kidding, I warrant," said the sheriff, the first to return to his senses. With a massive frame and manly features, he was someone who could be trusted. He apparently possessed quite a bit of mettle, too.

"I have an interesting little story for you," a hoarse voice said. "Once upon a time, there was a dog that was white all the way down to his tail. Ha, ha, ha—gyaaaah!"

Squeezing his left hand into a fist, D said, "It seems that as soon as the rocky hillside protecting it gave way, the resuscitation system was triggered. The occupant should be coming out before long."

Low and cold, his voice called to mind exquisite steel. The group found itself spellbound by it before they could grasp the meaning of what he'd said.

Immediately returning to his senses, the mayor squawked, "When you say *before long*, how soon do you mean?" D's tone of voice was such that it had them believing the unbelievable just like that.

D said the damnedest thing: "A minute from now."

The pronouncement was like a bolt out of the blue. Though everyone knew what he was talking about, their inability to fathom it left them looking first at one another, then staring stupidly at D, and finally focusing their gaze on the black object before them. They were speechless. Through a silence so absolute it seemed they might even be able to hear the sunlight raining down on them, the group waited.

"Ten seconds more," someone murmured. There was no need to say the rest.

Five seconds . . .

The people saw four streaks run from the top of the sphere all the way down to its bottom. If what D said was correct, would it be a Noble inside? If it were, they wondered if the dazzling sunlight wouldn't reduce him to dust the instant he appeared. Or would it be the stuff of legend—a wind gusting from the darkness of history, pregnant with evil, as a Greater Noble that could walk in the light of the sun returned to life?

The object was oblivious to all their speculation.

Zero.

There was a terrific whistle as white vapor shot from the top of the object. Steam. D alone remained, with the retreating throng preceded by their screams. To them, the sphere looked like a bud made of steel.

Slowly its four metallic petals opened, and from the still-billowing steam inside a figure in black became visible. Brilliant sunlight rained down on the figure, but he didn't cry out or writhe in pain. Instead, through the thinning white veil the figure could be clearly seen stretching both arms as he said, "Ah, yes!"

"Is that a N-N-Noble?" the mayor stammered.

"Yes," said D. It wouldn't do to leave his employer's question unanswered.

"Then . . . then what we have here is a Noble who can walk in the light of the sun . . . and terrorize us by day, too?"

"That it is, I suppose."

The mayor stared at D in shock. The last remark had been in the same hoarse voice he'd heard earlier. "Grab him," the mayor said, his tone nearly a whisper. "Grab him for us. He'll make a great tourist attraction."

The metallic petals continued to move, opening a full ninety degrees, while amidst the collection of unknown machinery within, a figure rose from what appeared to be a couch of sorts and stood, shrouded in black fur.

"Baron Macula?" D inquired.

A murmur went through the crowd. Did this gorgeous Hunter know the name of this Noble from untold antiquity? On further consideration, the ruins were called Castle Macula, making it possible to imagine the name of the lord of the manor. However, the people were so mesmerized by the gorgeous young man and his actions that they couldn't even conceive of it. At the same time, another suspicion formed in the crowd's mind: *Could it be this Hunter knew these strange events would take place today and he'd encounter a Noble?* But this suspicion vanished like mist thanks to the question D had posed and the answer that came next through the faint haze.

"That's right," a grave voice had replied.

"I'm D, a Hunter. You need to come with me."

"I don't want to."

"*What?*" the mayor and sheriff both exclaimed. Unlike the fearsome Noble's first reply, the second had been casual and flippant.

"This should be good," a hoarse voice from the vicinity of D's left hand murmured with amusement. "Looks like we've been thrown a curve."

"Give us some wind," D said in a low voice.

No one would've believed the sudden gale had gusted from the left hand of the inhumanly beautiful Hunter. Blowing away the faint steam,

it left the Noble born from those petals exposed in the light of day.

The murmur that shook the air was like the deep rumbling of a quake.

III

The Noble floated a foot and a half off the ground. From there, he ceremoniously lowered his left foot toward the ground—but just as the tip of his boot was about to make contact, it halted. He didn't pause because he'd remembered something. He was simply physically incapable of reaching the ground. Taking hold of the edge of one metallic petal, the man fidgeted a bit, then gave up.

"I'm getting down," he declared haughtily. Then, in a lower voice, he added spitefully, "Are you going to give me a hand or not, you dolts?"

To the people, he called to mind nothing more than a bear cub slipping and sliding its way down a tree trunk while a gigantic predator waited below. The Noble they'd so feared was stocky, not quite five feet tall, and from the top of his head to the tips of his toes, he was covered with black, bristly fur. However, what brought gasps from the onlookers and made terror bubble up from the depths of their souls was the demonic bronze mask he wore on his face. Though they could tell at a glance that it wasn't his real face, these people of the Frontier also felt it wasn't *just* a mask.

"Give me some help," he bellowed gruffly. "I can't get down."

It wasn't so much an order from the mayor as a shove from behind that sent two men, presumably from the town hall, forward, with trepidation. However, just ahead of them the man-bear seemed to have a change of heart. Stretching out a plump arm, he said, "Do you think a Noble would place himself in the hands of some hideous humans? Hey, you over there—come here."

On seeing who he was addressing, the whole group gasped; it was the handsome young man in black. The Noble's sentiment was understandable. But wasn't the young man a Hunter?

It may have been on account of this fact that the man-bear toned down the arrogance in his voice when he said, "What are you doing? Are you going to help me or not?"

D stepped forward. For a third time the crowd gasped. Before the ruckus had faded, D made his way through the people, took the man-bear by the arm, and roughly tossed him to the ground, chilling them all with terror.

Flipping over once, the man-bear hit the ground back first. "Oof!" he groaned pitifully.

A Noble's pain turned to rage, which would be visited on mankind—from the age of legends right down to the present day this horrifying truth had been etched into human DNA with bloody chisels and mallets

of cold terror. But the man-bear lay sprawled in a mess on the ground, just groaning for a while before slowly picking himself up like a centenarian.

"You son of a bitch. You're going to wish you hadn't done that!" he cursed.

However, the way he massaged and patted the small of his back was enough to cause someone to remark, "He's like a little old man or something, isn't he?"

It seemed their terror and expectations may have been too great, or there was something fundamentally wrong here—suspicions began to creep into the minds of the spectators, but they *were* still dealing with a Noble. The tension might've vanished from their faces, but the people surrounding him made no attempt to press any closer.

"Upsy-daisy!" the man-bear cried out like some countrified codger as he stretched his back out. Looking up at the heavens, he lifted his stubby arms as if cheering *hurrah!* "Ah, what marvelous weather! And my first peek at the sun in five millennia. It hasn't changed a bit," he remarked with pleasure. After a pause of about two seconds, he glared long and hard at the crowd around him, asking, "Who the hell are you people?"

Though they couldn't see any eye openings in the bronze mask, the people backed away noisily.

"What are you gawking at? I'm not on display!"

The mayor looked at D. He wanted the Hunter to begin a dialogue with the Noble. However, the handsome man in black just stood there, silent as a statue. Abandoning that notion, the mayor cleared his throat. The cough echoed through the area like the roar of a greater dragon. The silence ran that deep.

Perhaps the daunting position he was in impressed itself on the mayor once again, because he rested a rough hand against his chest, got his breathing under control, and desperately choked back his fear before saying, "I'm the mayor of the nearby village of Satori. Who in blazes are you?"

His voice trembled horribly, yet two thoughts occupied his brain at the same time. First, a Noble who walked in daylight—this was an exceptional fiend unlike any ever described. Second, a Noble who walked in daylight couldn't exist. Based on his words and actions up till now, he had to be lying. If that were true, the mayor decided that things would not go well for this man. Or such was his intent . . . but it didn't pan out as he'd planned.

The mask turned to him, asking, "What the hell do you want, sod buster?"

A great wind suddenly gusted by. The mayor tensed.

"So, you say you're the mayor of these parts, you little prick? Have you forgotten my name, then? Have you? Have you forgotten the name

of Baron Macula, Greater Noble and ruler of northern Frontier territories where so many rustic, pissant Nobles swaggered about?"

"No, I know that," the mayor said proudly. His face was as drained of life as that of a wax figure. "But I'd heard that the baron died more than five thousand years ago. The very thought of him showing up again in this day . . ."

"You great, thick-skulled dunce. Whoever said I was dead? Who saw it? I'm right here. I never set foot outside my dominion. I've remained here in hiding for a certain lofty purpose. But it would seem I may have been a bit too relaxed."

"What do you mean . . . a l-lofty purpose?"

The man-bear spat in disgust, "The brain of a Greater Noble is like the universe. Can the lowly maggots that crawl across the ground fathom the infinite vastness of the cosmos? Away from me!" He made a flourish of his arm, and the crowd backed away.

"But, um . . . You . . . Well, you're walking around in daylight . . . You c-couldn't be a Noble!" the mayor stammered in reply.

In return, he got a sneer—no, a mocking laugh. "Bwahahaha! Do you still have such stubborn notions stuck in your heads? So, am I to believe that through the five millennia I've slumbered nothing has changed, that you still fear the night, and when the sun goes down you shut the village gate and bolt your doors, quaking at the slightest howl of a monster through sleepless nights? Half your short lives are night. That you would sacrifice all that to pointless, antiquated notions—well, you really are a hopeless lot. Bwahahaha!"

"But . . . that's the way it is . . . for *all* Nobles," the mayor insisted, though he seemed to be speaking deliriously.

However, his words had an unexpected effect. The laughter of the man-bear, Baron Macula, stopped dead. His bronze mouth muttered a hushed, "*What?*" Then, "You say the Nobility don't walk in the light of day? Impossible. This is no laughing matter. You mean to tell me even now Nobles live solely by the darkness of night? I can't believe it!"

The voice that issued from the mask churned with deep-seated surprise and turmoil. But before the mayor could capitalize on the Noble's melancholy, he was silenced.

"Nobles are still creatures of the night," a steely voice had said, causing all to turn and look. "Even now, the radiant light doesn't belong to your kind. I need you to come with me."

At that instant, the chubby figure leapt from the spot beside D to one ten yards distant, like a rubber ball with a good bounce.

"My guess is you have some of our blood in you. Are you one of those dhampir deals? And such a killing lust—you plan on destroying me, don't you?"

D stepped forward without a word.

"Hey, now!" the pudgy figure exclaimed, making another jump that

put him in front of the crowd. Screaming, the people pushed backward. And another leap—this time bound for an area behind the crowd.

The wind howled. Catching the baron's body in midair, it sent him back the other way, despite his alarmed protests. D's left hand was raised. No one there recognized the tiny mouth that appeared on the palm of his hand for what it actually was.

As the terrific gale stopped cold, the baron was unceremoniously plopped down at D's feet.

"That hurts," the Noble said, rubbing his back.

True to form, D asked, "You don't have any other tricks?" He sounded quite surprised.

"Don't screw with me, or—oww!" the baron cried, glaring up at D from the ground. "I may be a Noble, but I'm a pacifist. Hereabouts, I led the peaceful life of a scholar. I had no use for all that fighting and parrying and fleeing nonsense."

"Then what was all that jumping and bouncing around?" asked D.

"Just a few abilities pertinent to my hobby."

"Your hobby?"

"Yes—martial arts, actually."

Although the man-bear hardly appeared suited to hand-to-hand combat, D didn't comment on that, saying only, "Next time you do that, I'll cut you down."

Fright seemed to coalesce in the baron's features, and he fell silent. He wasn't alone; the faces in the crowd surrounding them also went ghostly pale. They all believed D was serious.

"Sheesh. Do whatever you like," the baron finally said in a rotten little voice, after some hesitation.

A streak of light zipped out. A glint was all the people saw. By the time they'd blinked their eyes, the bronze mask had fallen at the baron's feet. It was split in two. However, no one had seen it break.

A murmur that defied description ran through the crowd. It was one of amazement at D's skill, then acceptance, but the people's expressions were those of disbelief.

The features beneath the mask were almost exactly what the people had imagined. In other words, the pudgy egg of a face had heavy eyebrows that looked like smears of charcoal, narrow eyes agleam with craftiness, a short, fat dumpling of a nose, and thick lips that looked like they might disgorge vomit at any moment. Yet it may have been his triple chin that leant an undeniable charm to his features.

Here and there, various comments were uttered. Glaring at those responsible, the baron asked in an intimidating manner, "You got a problem with me?"

D turned to the mayor. The old man appeared quite satisfied, with rosy color swiftly flooding his face. "We'll hold onto the device he came out of," the mayor said. "A pod that actually concealed a Noble—

tourists will be coming to see it for the next century. Don't touch any of the controls inside! The thing's dangerous."

Then turning back to D, he continued, "A Noble is more than even our sheriff can handle. If you'd be so good as to escort him back to the town hall. You'll be paid there."

The mayor grinned like a man enraptured. It was fairly unsettling to behold.